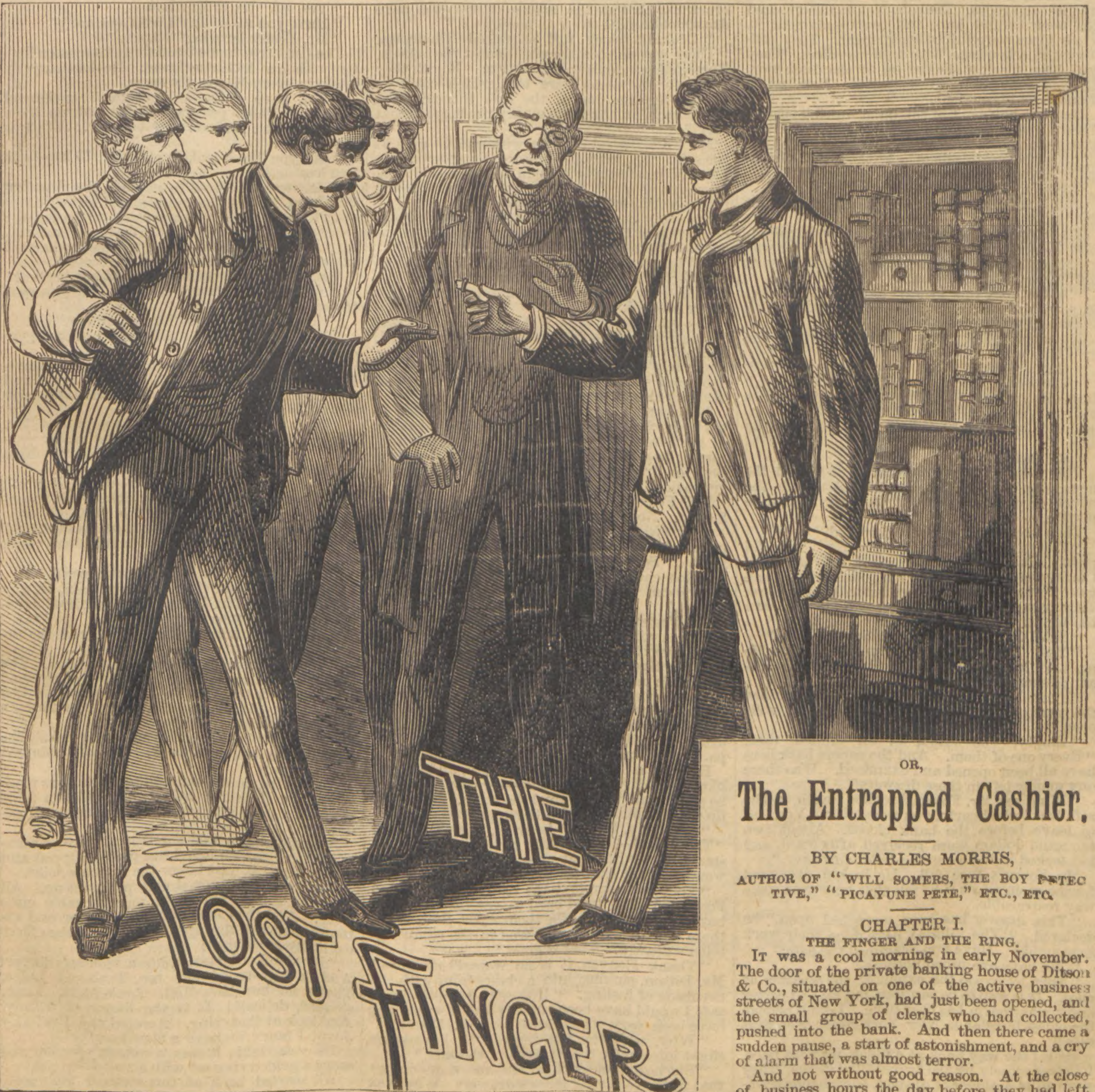


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No. 423



"IT IS THE FINGER OF A LADY. AND LOOK AT THAT RING! AN OPAL AS I LIVE!"

The Entrapped Cashier.

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS, THE BOY DETECTIVE," "PICAYUNE PETE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FINGER AND THE RING.

It was a cool morning in early November. The door of the private banking house of Ditson & Co., situated on one of the active business streets of New York, had just been opened, and the small group of clerks who had collected, pushed into the bank. And then there came a sudden pause, a start of astonishment, and a cry of alarm that was almost terror.

And not without good reason. At the close of business hours the day before they had left the bank in perfect order. Now it presented a

scene of startling confusion. Drawers were pulled open, papers scattered, valuable documents lay idly tossed on the floor.

The three or four men who were present looked at the scene with staring eyes. They stood as if petrified, gazing at the frightful disorder.

Then the foremost of the party broke out in a sharp exclamation:

"Lord preserve us! the bank has been robbed!"

"It's been gone through in the night," cried a second. "And by all that's good, they've made clean work! It looks like a clean sweep."

"What's to be done?" asked a third. "This is a frightful business. There'll be the very Old Nick to pay."

"Let us examine. How did the burglars get in? What have they taken? That is what we want to know."

"Don't touch a thing, on your life!" exclaimed a more cautious one. "Leave everything as you see it till Mr. Ditson comes. He must be sent for immediately. The building had better be locked up again till a detective can be brought. We don't want to get into trouble."

"That is a good idea. Suppose you run up and report the robbery to Mr. Ditson. We will see that nothing is disturbed."

Without a word the former speaker turned and left the room. The others closed and locked the door behind him, and took seats near it. Their faces were full of excitement. They conversed in a low tone, with nervous voices. They had been terribly shaken up by the discovery. It was impossible to conjecture how much damage had been done.

Nearly a half-hour of this quiet waiting passed. Then the door was tried from without, and violently shaken.

"How comes this door locked? Is nobody inside?" demanded a stern voice.

The men inside started.

"It is Mr. Foster," one of them said. "Let him in."

The door was instantly unlocked and opened, and the gentleman outside stepped in. He was a tall, strongly-built, handsome young man, with a noble expression of face.

"What does this mean?" he asked, sharply, in a tone of anger. "The door locked at this hour, and you men sitting—"

He paused, and gave a sudden start, as his eyes fell on the scene before him.

"Hal! What is this? What in the world—"

"The bank has been robbed, Mr. Foster," broke in the man with the key. "We found it as you see it. We have sent for Mr. Ditson, and took care not to disturb anything until he came."

"Robbed!"

This was the only word that came from the new-comer's lips. He stood looking at the wreck, as motionless as if he had been turned to marble.

Then he suddenly started forward.

"This is terrible!" he exclaimed. "You did right; but this must be looked into at once. Clark, you hurry down to the police station, and have a detective sent up here immediately. Here, Thompson and Smith, it is best we should learn the worst. Let us see what has been taken."

"Shall we pick up these scattered papers?"

"Yes. Lay them in order on the counter. No need to leave them on the floor. Let me examine these drawers."

He hurried behind the counter and examined the various drawers, all of which stood wide open.

"Empty," he cried, in an excited tone. "Every one of them. And the papers back here have all been opened and examined. Was there any money left in these drawers?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Foster," replied Smith. "The safe was locked early, you remember. You had to leave before the bank closed. About two thousand dollars were received afterward, and left locked in the receiving-teller's drawer."

Mr. Foster's face fell. He looked dismayed for the moment, as if he felt that he was in some way responsible.

"This drawer has been wrenched open," he declared. "The villains have done their work thoroughly. Have you examined the safe?"

"We have examined nothing."

"Then let us see the extent of the disaster at once. It is well to be cautious, but we had better know what harm has been done. I don't believe the oldest burglar in New York could open that safe."

He led the way back at a quick, nervous pace, followed closely by the two excited clerks. They were all in a quiver of dismay, their hands trembling, their eyes staring. They dreaded some new and more terrible revelation.

Across the rear portion of the banking-room ran a high screen reaching half-way to the ceiling. This closed off the cashier's room, into the rear wall of which was sunk the large iron safe, that held the valuables of the bank.

Into this inclosure the three men entered, and then stopped, with a general exclamation.

"They have been here in earnest," declared Thompson.

"And have worked like Trojans," chimed in Smith.

"But have not succeeded," added Mr. Foster, with a look of satisfaction. "I knew that chilled iron would defy their tools."

That the burglars had been hard at work was very evident. There were signs to show that they had worked long and vainly on the lock. They had then inserted their powerful wrenches and jimmies along the upper edge of the thick door, and had succeeded in forcing it open more than an inch.

The firm, thick iron of the door had been bent outward like a plate of tin by the force of their powerful tools. A gaping opening revealed itself between the iron frame and the door.

"They must have used wrenches like forty-horse steam-engines," declared Smith, with a look of admiration. "Why didn't they try at the bottom instead of the top? If they'd had a crack like that at the bottom they could have drawn out a neat stock of money."

"Couldn't work it," answered Thompson. "There was no room for purchase at the bottom. These fellows don't work for fun. Might they not have had some wire tool, which could be pushed into the top of the safe through that open crack, and draw up money packages in that way?"

Mr. Foster stood looking with serious eyes at the safe. The talk of his companions passed into his ears, but he gave no sign that he heard it. Thoughts of more importance seemed passing through the depths of his mind.

Suddenly he gave a violent start, and an exclamation of horror broke from his lips, while his face flushed with intense feeling.

"What can that mean?" he asked, in a deep whisper, his quivering finger pointing to a spot on the edge of the safe door, about two feet above the lock.

His excitement was instantly shared by his companions. Several red spots, as of blood, marked the cold iron. And just visible through the nearly closed crack between the edge of the door and the frame was a piece of torn and bleeding human flesh!

They shuddered involuntarily. A portion of the body of some human being had been caught in that iron trap. The door had apparently sprung to and torn the quivering and bleeding limb or fragment from the body. It seemed yet to ooze blood.

Mr. Foster turned away with a sickening feeling. Not so his colder-blooded companions.

"I'll swear if one of the rascals hasn't got nipped!" cried Smith, with a chuckle of delight. "Serves him right!"

"Got caught in his own trap!" responded Thompson. "That's a neat bit of tit for tat, I take it."

Mr. Foster turned to them rather angrily.

"That will do," he said, sharply. "We will leave everything as it stands until Mr. Ditson or the detective arrives. That bit of crimson flesh has made me half sick."

He led the way to the front, followed by his less sensitive companions.

They were not there long before the door again opened, and Mr. Ditson entered, in company with the man who had gone for him.

He was a large, full-faced man, and looked like a good liver. His brows were contracted as he stood and gazed around the room. His under lip slightly hung, as if with suppressed dismay.

"You here, Foster?" he cried, in a shrill tone. "This is bad—bad! It has given me a regular start. Out with it at once. Let me know the worst. What have they taken?"

"They have emptied the drawers," answered Foster. "They tried hard to get into the safe, but it was too much for them. Mr. Smith says there was about two thousand in the receiving-teller's drawer. That is gone."

"Thank Heaven, it is no worse!" exclaimed Mr. Ditson, sinking into a chair, faint with the revulsion of feeling. "If they had emptied that safe I would have been ruined; and it would not have been very comfortable for you, Foster."

"Why, no," was the reply. "I have some slight interest in the contents of the safe."

"But how came such an amount of money as that in the receiving teller's drawer? Why was it not locked up?"

The tone was sharp with suspicion.

Mr. Foster changed color.

"I left here yesterday shortly after three," he explained. "All the cash received up to that time was put in the safe. There were two or three gentlemen yet in the bank, but I judged they would only leave a small amount."

"One of them was Jenkins, the drover," explained Mr. Smith. "He made a considerable deposit."

"That was wrong, Foster, very wrong. Business is business, and I don't like to see my business neglected. You had no right to lock the safe and leave till all the money was in it. I can't afford to pay to the tune of two thousand dollars, for your hurry."

Mr. Foster's face grew very red. He began to explain, in a hesitating tone. But to his apparent relief two other persons entered at that moment.

One of them was Clark, who had been sent for a detective. The other, who came forward with a quick, brisk step, was a full-faced, powerfully built man. His eyes were gray and keen, and moved about the room with a startling quickness. By the time he had reached the group he seemed to have taken in every detail of the situation.

"I am told there has been a robbery here," he said briskly. "Mr. Ditson, I believe."

"Yes, sir," the broker bowed.

"Have you made any investigation?"

"Mr. Foster here can tell you."

The detective turned and fixed his eyes on Foster with an inquiring gaze. He had already taken in every face in the room.

"We have disturbed nothing," exclaimed Foster. "Those papers were picked up from the floor and laid on the counter. That is all."

"But you have looked around. What have you learned?"

A few words sufficed to explain the situation of affairs. When the condition of the safe was described, and the speaker went on to tell the story of the gory trophy held by the iron clasp, Mr. Ditson grew slightly pale, while a look of satisfaction came into the detective's face.

"Hal! That is something interesting!" he exclaimed. "You have the key? Did you open the safe?"

"No. I preferred to disturb nothing."

"Very good. Wait a minute till I take a general look around."

He passed quickly through the room, examining every point with his sharp eyes, and specially studying the doors and windows. He shook his head doubtfully.

"They must have had a key to your door, Mr. Ditson. There is no sign of a pick-lock or jimmy. Not a scratch on door or window. Now let me see the safe."

He was led back to the rear office. For full five minutes he stood looking at the safe, examining every point with attentive eyes.

"Those are old hands," was all he said. "I never saw traces of more powerful tools. Will you try the lock, Mr. Foster?"

Foster inserted the key without a word.

"They have had their labor in vain, at any rate," declared Mr. Ditson, with an air of satisfaction. "They have got nothing."

"I am not so sure of that," answered the detective.

The door proved very difficult to open. The severe wrenching and twisting it had received had jammed the bolt, so that the lock worked very stiffly. It took all the strength of Foster's two hands to turn the key.

Finally it yielded, with a ringing clash. The bolt of the lock shot back. The door started slightly open.

And at the same moment the mysterious piece of human flesh fell to the floor with a faint thud, that gave all present an involuntary shudder.

A single glance told the story. It was a human finger, which had been partly clipped and partly torn off, just below the knuckle-joint.

The detective stooped and picked it up. All crowded round him with ungovernable curiosity. And then a sensation of horror and astonishment ran through the group, as the officer excitedly exclaimed:

"By the Lord Harry, it's a woman's finger! And a high-toned one too, I should judge. That's no bur-lar's Moll. Look at it. Long, slender, delicate! It is the finger of a lady. And look at that ring. An opal as I live! By Jove! I fancy we have a clew here!"

He was right; it was a woman's finger, and wore a golden ring set with a valuable opal.

All started back at this strange discovery. But Foster seemed most affected of all. He turned deathly pale, and staggered back into his

chair, while a low moaning sound came from his white lips.

Mr. Ditson eyed him curiously.

"What is the matter, Foster?"

"I am too faint-hearted," he replied, with a hollow effort at a laugh. "That thing has sickened me. To think of a woman with a finger like that getting it caught in such a fatal trap, and torn off in that horrible way!"

He raised his hands involuntarily to his face. The detective fixed his eyes on him.

"I fancy the lady can spare a finger," he coolly said. "She seems to have been well paid for ring and finger."

He pointed to the safe, whose door he had flung open.

It looked as if the burglars had succeeded in some way in obtaining a portion of its contents. The bundles of bank-notes were tumbled over the safe bottom, as if overturned by some instrument.

"Do you know what money was there?"

"Yes," answered Foster, with forced composure.

"Then count the contents and see what is lost. I will take charge of my lady's ring-finger. It will be strange if such a very neat clew does not put us on the track of the burglars."

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF THE RING.

THE detective was right. The burglars had succeeded in paying themselves for their trouble. Twenty-five thousand dollars were missing from the contents of the safe.

Mr. Foster made the examination and report with what composure he could. But a shadow of pallor clung to his face. Something seemed to have given him a terrible nerve shock.

While this investigation was being made the detective was not idle. He had made a thorough study of the bank, examining every point with the utmost minuteness. The open drawers, the scattered paper, the floor, the walls, the doors and windows were all intently studied. And not a movement, or expression of face, in any of the clerks, escaped his quick eyes. He finished by a second close study of the marks on the safe.

"What time do you open your doors, Mr. Ditson?"

"At ten o'clock."

"It is ten now."

Mr. Ditson, who had recovered his composure, took the hint, and gave the order to open the bank for business.

He then invited the detective into his private office.

"What conclusion have you come to, Mr. Sharp?" he asked.

"None. I am yet at sea."

"None?"

"This work was done by old hands. How they got into the place is not clear. There are some scratches on the lock, but I doubt if they are new ones. I fancy they must have had a key."

"A key! How could they get that?"

Mr. Sharp shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? That is one of the things to find out. Who carries your key, Mr. Ditson?"

"Davis. Will Davis. A thoroughly reliable man. Has been with me these ten years."

"Call him in here. I would like to question all your clerks in succession. But who is this Mr. Foster?"

"Foster? He is the very soul of my business. He is a minor partner, too. That is, he has an interest in the profits, in addition to his salary. This loss partly falls on him."

"Ah!"

"You don't suspect him?"

"Oh no! And yet the sight of that finger had a remarkable effect on him."

"Yes, I saw that. But he is a regular baby that way—as soft-hearted as a nervous woman. But Foster's sound. He is the very soul of honor."

Another slight shrug of the shoulders marked the officer's opinion.

"Send in Davis, Mr. Ditson."

Davis was sent in. The other clerks followed, one by one. Mr. Sharp questioned them all in a quiet, half-indifferent manner, as if he had perfect confidence in each particular one. He gained no information bearing on the robbery.

An hour was occupied in this investigation. At its termination, Mr. Ditson entered the office.

"What results, Mr. Sharp?"

"None. These men seem innocent. There is one point I would like to know. I understand that Mr. Foster left the bank yesterday at an earlier hour than usual. Do you know why?"

"I have no idea."

"I wish you would ask him. But no. That is not wise. Leave it to me to find out."

"You are not doubting him again?"

"Oh, of course not! I doubt nobody, but I do want to know everything. That is an odd peculiarity of mine. I am always wanting to know. But to doubt? Certainly not."

Mr. Ditson looked at the detective's face, which wore a very faint smile.

"There is one thing I would like to know," the banker broke out suddenly. "How did that finger get into the crack of the safe door? Why at that spot, it was not open a quarter of an inch."

"There is another mystery goes along with that," answered the officer quietly. "How did they get the money out of the narrow crack at the top of the door? I have a theory. I may be wrong, but I think I am right."

"What is it?"

Mr. Foster entered the office as they spoke, and stood listening to their conversation.

"It is this. The door must have been forced wider open than we found it. It would take a wide crack at the top to insert their instruments and draw up those bundles of bank notes. But iron has a spring. It was held open by some tool, a chisel or the like. In their operations this tool was disturbed and forced out. The door sprung partly shut, and at that moment the woman pal of the burglars had her finger carelessly inserted in the crack. The sharp edge of the iron closed on it like a pair of shears. It was nipped off so that it only held by a fragment of flesh, and a quick jerk of terror tore this asunder."

"What a frightful accident!" exclaimed Foster, with a shudder, his pallor returning.

"It is evident, Mr. Foster," replied the detective, fixing his cool eyes on him, "that you have not been brought up to butchering. The sight of torn flesh seems to sicken you."

"Yes, I can't help." He seated himself as if from a feeling of faintness.

"That is my theory, at any rate," continued the detective. "They were very likely scared away by the accident."

"But why did they not stay to recover the finger?" asked Mr. Ditson. "It is strange they left such a dangerous piece of evidence behind them."

"Who knows? They may have rushed away in a panic. Some alarm may have startled them. Or the wound may have been bleeding dangerously, and had to be hurried away. Men do many foolish things in ticklish situations."

A momentary silence followed these words.

"Will you let me see that finger again, Mr. Sharp?" asked Foster, suddenly.

"Certainly. I don't want to make you sick, though." He drew out of his pocket the handkerchief in which he had wrapped the crimsoned trophy.

"I fancy I can stand it now," answered Mr. Foster in a calm tone.

He bent over the finger, examined it closely, and carefully observed the ring.

"That will do. Thank you," he said, in a strangely quiet voice.

When he looked up his face was steady and calm, though still somewhat pale.

Yet the detective noticed one telling indication. There was a deep red line on his lower lip. He had bitten into it until the blood was ready to start.

"Do you recognize the finger?" asked the officer, fixing his eyes on the face before him.

"No," answered Mr. Foster, quietly.

"Or the ring?"

"No."

There may have been a severe inward struggle, but outwardly he was calm and composed. He had overcome all show of emotion.

Mr. Sharp continued to gaze at him for a few seconds. Then he took his hat from the table and rose.

"That will do, gentlemen. This investigation must be continued outside. I know of only one set of burglars fit for this job. And I think, with this bit of evidence, the case will not be hard to handle. Good-day."

He walked to the door, opened it, and stepped into the outer room.

The two bankers remained.

"Well," asked Mr. Ditson, "what do you think of the affair?"

"That we can safely leave it in Mr. Sharp's hands. He seems to know his business."

"I hope so. It is a heavy loss."

"For that two thousand that was stolen from the receiving teller's drawer I wish you to hold me responsible. It was my fault it was lost."

Mr. Ditson looked at him curiously.

"What took you away so early, yesterday, Foster?"

"I should not have gone. It was to escort a lady friend to the cars. She was taking a train for Boston, and asked my escort. I did wrong and am ready to pay for it."

"We will think further of that. Let us to business now."

The business of the bank that day went on as quietly as if nothing had happened. The affair was kept quiet, as Mr. Ditson did not care to be deluged with a host of curious questions, or run down with an array of reporters. It was certain that when the strange incident of the severed finger was made public the whole town would be agog with interest and curiosity.

Mr. Foster attended steadily to his duties. He seemed perfectly quiet and assiduous, and no one could have guessed that there was any emotion in his breast, except from his continued paleness.

The main traces of his morning excitement were a strange look in his eyes, and an occasional movement as if he was forcing himself to drive away awkward and disturbing thoughts.

Toward noon he rapidly dashed off a brief note. Leaving the bank for his noon lunch, he dispatched this to its destination by a district messenger boy, directing him to return the answer at a certain eating saloon.

Mr. Foster lingered long over his lunch, his eyes fixed on the door in seeming anxiety.

It was an hour before the messenger made his appearance, and handed the banker a small sealed note.

He tore it open with fingers that slightly trembled despite himself.

But a look of deep satisfaction passed over his face as his eyes quickly devoured the contents.

"Gone!" he muttered. "Then my fears were naught. I knew it was impossible. It was insane folly to think it. Yet that finger!—that ring! Ah! there is an extraordinary mystery hidden behind all this. What is it? Shall I ever solve it?—But Estelle! No! no!"

He rose, tore the note into a thousand shreds and scattered them in the gutter as he walked along the street toward the bank.

At five o'clock that afternoon Mr. Foster reached his rooms. They were situated in a handsome residence on one of the up-town streets.

He flung himself into an easy-chair, and passed his hands across his brow.

"I have never gone through such a day in my life before," he said, with a sigh of relief. "To play a part such as I have played! It would have killed a weaker man."

He smiled in the consciousness of strength.

"What is next to be done? Shall I seek— No. That detective suspects me. He may have me tracked. I must first find if she— But the note I received is enough. And I saw the Express start on its road for Boston. Why cannot I drive these foolish ideas from my head? There is one way to settle it. I will telegraph."

He hastily wrote a dispatch, and rung for a servant.

"Take this to the nearest telegraph station. Bring me the answer as soon as it arrives."

He took a book and tried to read, but the characters seemed blurred on the page. He could not bring his mind down to the fictitious tale of life. There was too deep a real tragedy at play in his brain.

Two hours passed before the answer arrived. He tore it open with nervous fingers, and ran his eyes eagerly over the contents.

It read as follows:

"Yes. I am safely here. Arrived after midnight. Am well, but tired. Thanks for your solicitude. ESTELLE."

He gave a deep sigh of relief.

"Then all is right, and I can drive that gnawing anxiety from my brain. But the ring! The mystery still hangs about that. Why did I not mention that in my message? By Heaven I cannot sleep or rest until that extraordinary affair is settled."

He rose, seized his hat, and left the house. But he seemed to have no special object in view, unless it were to cool his blood in the brisk November air. He walked about in a desultory fashion, without aim or destination. If there was really a spy on his track, as he thought possible, said spy was likely to have a confusing time of it.

He finally ended by taking a car on the Elevated, and rushing down-town at locomotive speed.

Leaving the train at a station well down-town he sought the main office of the Western

Union Telegraph Co. Here he wrote and dispatched another message.

For two hours more the uneasy and restless mortal wandered about, dropping into place after place, but staying nowhere more than a few minutes.

At the end of this time he returned up-town and went home.

"Anything for me, James?" he asked, at the door.

"Yes, sir. A telegram. Just come. Not five minutes ago."

"Very well."

He took the message with affected coolness, and walked calmly to his room. But the fingers with which he tore it open slightly trembled. He read it with a sensation of mingled hope and fear.

"What can be wrong?" it ran. "I do not understand. The ring you speak of was stolen from my jewel casket more than a week ago. By a servant probably. What can you mean? Explain by letter."

"ESTELLE."

CHAPTER III.

THE RED HALL.

"By Jove, Foster, you banking fellows are going into the romantic business strongly. That affair of the clipped-off finger is the talk of the town. It has roused such a sensation as we have not had for ten years. The finger of a high-born lady, they say? And wearing a valuable ring? Come, come, confess that this is a got-up affair—a clever advertisement to bring customers to your house."

The speaker was a fashionably-dressed gentleman, of apparently some thirty years of age. He had a classically-cut face, with long hair, worn well down on his neck and forehead. His expression was a peculiar one. Apparently frank and open, there was something in it deep and hidden. He was not one of those transparent men who wear their souls upon their faces. Yet he spoke with an engaging air of easy good-nature.

"Faith, yes," answered Harry Foster, with a laugh. "It has brought us customers enough, but not of the kind we like. We have kept open house these three days to all the curious people in town. And our private office has been invaded by reporters until there is not room to lay down a thimble. I think we could spare some of these customers."

"But you don't really want to claim that it is all so? No, no, that's too thin. Our high-born ladies don't play the part of burglars' assistants. Confess that that finger was got from the hospital, and put there to give the good people of New York a bit of a sensation."

"You can have it your own way, Paul. Anyhow you will acknowledge our little game was well managed."

Paul looked at the speaker with an odd expression, and then broke out into a hearty laugh.

"But is it true, in solid earnest? You are not pulling wool over the public eye?"

"It was true enough to sicken me, when I saw that bleeding finger."

"But, good Heaven, man! this is an extraordinary business!" Paul spoke with great energy. "Who did it? Who was the woman? The police, of course, have it in hand. What have they discovered? With a clew like that ring and finger they ought to have no trouble to get on the track. Tell me all about it. It is safe with me, you know. You suspect somebody? Admit it!"

A look of uneasiness came upon Foster's face which the other did not fail to observe.

"Don't ask me," he answered. "The detectives think they are on a track. What it is I am not at liberty to reveal."

"Is it a true trail? Have you no suspicions yourself?"

Foster changed countenance still more under this cross-questioning.

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Clifford," he replied, rather coldly, "I would prefer not to talk further about this subject. I am not afraid of your discretion, of course, but other people's secrets are not mine to discuss."

"You suspect somebody. I can see that. And yet you have not given the police your clew. You know this woman, Foster. You are trying to screen her."

"Sir!" Foster was on his feet, with a face full of anger. "You are going further than friendship permits. I don't like this prying, and want no more of it. I will tell you this, and you can make the most of it: If I discover this woman and her confederates I will deliver them up to the law, though she were my own sister and

they were my own brothers. I make no terms with crime. Now let that end it."

"Forgive me, Harry," answered Paul, with a laugh. "I am devoured with curiosity. I may as well acknowledge it. No Paul Pry could be worse than I. But, hang it, I have nothing else to do, and a bit of mystery like this is a sweet morsel. Never mind. I will find out who your detective is, and worm it out of him. I am dying to see that ring, and the finger that holds it."

"Then you will have to die in ignorance," rejoined Foster, with a shadow of alarm in his tone.

"Suppose I say that I suspect who it belongs to, and ask to see it in the interest of the law?"

"Very neat. But I will warn them against you. Come, let us take a turn in the air. It is insufferably warm here."

Foster was evidently more uneasy and disquieted than he cared to show. The two friends left the hotel parlor in which they had been seated, and strolled out on Broadway.

They walked slowly down the thronged street, the cool evening air driving away the feverish anxiety from Foster's face, and bringing back its usual composure. Somehow the questions of his companion seemed to have seriously ruffled and alarmed him.

Their conversation took a lighter tone as they walked on block after block.

"By the way," remarked Clifford at length, "it is a week and more since I saw you at the Red Hall. And you owe me a revenge. You emptied my purse at our last sitting. When shall I have satisfaction?"

"I don't know," answered Harry indifferently. "I am growing tired of the whole business."

"It is easy to grow tired when we win. But the losers have some rights."

Foster started as if he had been stung.

"What do you mean, sir? I do not like insinuations."

"I know what is the trouble, Foster. The Countess is away. If she were there you would not need twice asking. Faith, though, you are not the only trout that is ready to spring at that bait."

"I will meet you where you will," cried Foster, with a sudden show of anger. "And I should advise you not to bring her name into connection with mine in that flippant tone." His lip took a hard curve. "Say when. I am your man."

"To-morrow night, then. Bring a goodly show of ducats. I intend to fleece you."

"Very well. You may look for me."

A few more words passed, but the friendliness of their tone was gone. Foster bit his lip as though he was chafing inwardly. They soon parted, Clifford turning back to stroll again up Broadway.

Foster looked after him.

"I don't know what to make of that man," he said. "All these side cuts are not chance. Paul Clifford does not impress you like a man who does things by chance. He has some object in view in his impertinence. What is it? I will meet him, at any rate."

What Clifford thought, as he walked away in the opposite direction, was not evident. A peculiar smile marked his face, and he twirled his cane with an air of deep satisfaction.

"Did I speak of him as a trout?" he muttered. "I should have said gudgeon."

He walked more rapidly as he went on. Finally he took a stage, and rode a considerable distance up town.

Leaving the stage, he walked down one of the cross streets, and entered a house not far removed from Broadway. Walking up-stairs he opened the door of an elegantly furnished sitting-room. It was occupied by a single person, a gentleman who sat reading in an easy-chair.

This person sprang up as Clifford entered, flung his book carelessly on a center table, and advanced somewhat eagerly.

He was a tall, slender personage, with a pale and not very agreeable face. The nose was long and sharp, the lips thin and bloodless, the eyes restless.

"What results?" he asked.

"I have met him. He is dangerous. He must be dealt with."

"Does he suspect?"

"Too much, I fear."

"But what? Explain."

"I have nothing to explain. He is suspiciously cautious. I fear him."

"Then we must crush him."

"As we would a snake. He has promised to come to the Red Hall to-morrow night to give me satisfaction."

"Shall we dispose of him? The Countess is absent."

"No, no, no, man! That might be dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because he is already suspected of this robbery. I have learned several things to-night. I am sure he is shadowed by the police. If he should disappear, some awkward investigations might be made."

"Shadowed? And you have invited him there? That will never do, Paul."

"Trust me," answered Paul, with a curling lip. "I am not fool enough to expose the secrets of the Red Hall. I will manage to get rid of the police spy."

"But what do you propose? You have some plan."

"Leave it to me to settle with our man."

"But how? You are rascally mysterious."

"Sit down; I will explain."

A long conversation ensued between the pair of villainous confederates. It was a conversation in which one of our characters was vitally interested. But the features of this conversation we must leave the future to reveal.

"What think you, Juan? Is it safe?" asked Paul Clifford, at the end of this conference.

"It seems so."

"And shrewd?"

"Yes."

"It must work. The Countess is weak on him. He is at all points in our way. We get rid of him, and screen ourselves, all in one act."

"But I dread the Countess," answered Juan, with an uneasy look. "She has a devilish temper when started. If she suspects foul play with her lover, chains would not hold her."

"She dare do nothing," Clifford's lip curled savagely. "She will not lift a finger. She knows me."

Juan looked at his companion. A significant smile passed between them.

"I should counsel her not to," came from his thin lips. "I would sooner play at odds against the devil than Paul Clifford."

"And I against the chief of his imps than Juan Vernel."

It was evident that some serious, perhaps fatal, peril was hovering over the head of Harry Foster. He was being drawn into the maelstrom of ruin and disgrace.

The night passed. The next day came and went. Night again threw its shadowing mantle over the great city, shrouding all the shapes of crime that wait until the sun has set to show themselves abroad. Dark deeds there were in abundance in that vast metropolis, but they hid their unsightly forms under the glooms of the night.

Harry Foster walked up Broadway, with his erect attitude and firm tread. Twenty paces behind him came another form, seemingly of a young man about town. To all appearance he had no special errand abroad, yet strangely his business took him over the same route as that followed by the unsuspecting man ahead.

Still further in the rear came a light, one-seated carriage, occupied by a single person.

This was a gentleman, who now drove briskly up by the side of the pavement.

"Mr. Foster," he called.

Harry paused and looked around.

"Paul Clifford!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. I have been taking a little turn for exercise. Step in. We will have a breeze up the avenues."

"Thank you, I prefer to walk."

"But you are a judge of horseflesh. I want you to see the pace of my animal. Come. To oblige me."

Thus urged, Harry, not very willingly, stepped into the carriage. Paul had said nothing about the spy, whom he saw and recognized. He had his reasons for silence on this point.

He gave his restless horse the reins, and drove away at a sharp pace.

The spy, who had come up close enough to hear their last words, wore an aspect of discomfiture.

"Very neatly flung," he muttered. "But they are only off for a turn in the Boulevard's. I can take up the trail later."

He did not conjecture how completely he had been flung. His whole labor had been wasted through this shrewd move of Paul Clifford.

Few words passed between the young men as they drove up-town together. Neither seemed in a talkative mood. As soon as he reached a clear street Clifford put the horse to his paces.

"A good stepper. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," answered Harry briefly.

"You are non-committal," Clifford laughed.

"I see what is working in your head. Well, I am ready. The Red Hall let it be, then."

He drove for some distance, and finally drew up in front of a stylish livery stable, where he left his team in charge of the attendants.

"We have not far to go," he said.

In fact very few steps brought them to the front of a large, handsome mansion, one of a fine brown-stone row, yet very quiet and somber-looking in front.

A ring brought a colored servant to the door. He appeared to recognize the gentlemen, and made way for them to enter.

"Any one here, James?"

"Several, sir. Mr. Vernel just entered. But there was a party before him."

"Very well."

They walked forward over the velvet carpet, and up the broad, stately stairway. The reason for the peculiar name given the mansion made itself apparent as they advanced.

A crimson tone predominated, alike in carpets, and on the walls and ceiling. The light of the blazing chandelier gave back almost a lurid reflection.

This was still more evident when they reached the head of the stairs, and advanced along a short hall to a door that stood partly open.

It revealed a brilliantly-lighted room, luxuriantly furnished and ornamented. But the red tint everywhere prevailed, a rich crimson glow that dazzled the eyes that gazed upon it.

Several tables stood on the rich carpet. Around one of these, in the upper end of the room, a group of men was gathered.

They were very quiet. Only an occasional word came from them. They seemed engaged in some absorbing occupation.

One of these persons lifted his eyes as the newcomers entered the doorway. His face lighted up, and he advanced quickly toward them.

"Welcome, gentlemen," he greeted. "You are almost a stranger here, Mr. Foster."

"Good-evening, Mr. Vernel. I have had something else to busy me. But I promised Mr. Clifford his revenge."

"That is capital. There is Warner burning to lose some money. We can make up a quartette game. What say, Clifford?"

"I am agreeable."

A secret look passed between the conspirators. The prey was in the toils.

Mr. Warner proved very willing to take a hand as Foster's partner. A call to an attendant provided them with cards, and a game was quickly in play, with Foster and Warner pitted against Clifford and Vernel.

The secret of the Red Hall was out. It was a private gambling establishment, unknown to the police, and run by the woman to whom they gave the odd title of the Countess.

But it was very evident that Foster did not suspect the true character and designs of his associates. A peculiar look that had passed between Warner and Paul Clifford showed an understanding very dangerous to their victim.

"Luck never clings long to one side," cried Paul, with an aspect of gay satisfaction. "I knew I only wanted a fair chance, to discount your good fortune. Game again, and we win."

In fact he and his partner had been winning steadily since the play began. The stakes were high, and their pile of winnings was accumulating.

"There was never a lane without a turn," answered Harry, with great coolness. "It is your deal, Mr. Warner."

The game went on with the same fortune. Harry and his partner continued steadily to lose.

"Had we not better change the game?" suggested Warner.

"No. Let us fight it out on this line."

"I will send you home penniless," laughed Paul. "I knew that if you accepted my challenge the tables would turn."

"He laughs best who laughs last."

"But this is a dry business at best," exclaimed Juan. "Let us wet our lips with a glass of wine. Here, James; fetch us some of that old sherry."

In a few minutes an attendant appeared, with the wine called for. Foster turned in his chair to take the glass offered him.

He was but a second, but in that brief interval a quick manipulation had taken place. The winnings of the game, which lay heaped before Juan Vernel, were alertly slipped from the table. They were as quickly replaced, or at least to all appearance. When Harry turned back to the table, with his glass of amber-tinted wine, there was nothing to show that any change had taken place. The winnings of his oppo-

nent seemed still to lay before the thin-lipped player.

"Here's to your better fortune," laughed Paul, carrying the glass to his lips.

"Thanks for the sentiment. I hope it will prove a true one."

They tossed off their wine, and returned the empty glasses to the attendant.

Strangely enough from that moment the luck suddenly changed. Harry and his partner began to steadily win back their losses. The pile of winnings before Juan Vernel rapidly lowered. He divided it into two heaps, paying from one of these to Warner, and from the other to Foster.

"By Jove, that wine has done for us," cried Clifford. "We have lost our grip."

Harry laughed.

"I told you the tables would turn."

In half an hour he had recovered all his losses. The game was where it began.

Clifford appeared moody and dissatisfied. He flung down his cards spitefully.

"I'll be hanged if I play any more to-night!" he exclaimed. "That jade, Fortune, has flung me again."

"Then you want no more satisfaction?"

"Not to-night, at any rate."

Harry laughed carelessly, rolled up his money, and thrust it into his pocket.

"We will cry quits then."

They rose and strolled to the other end of the room, where some deep play was in progress. After a half-hour more Harry excused himself, and left the hall.

The conspirators followed him out with triumphant glances.

"It was neatly played," declared Juan. "He never dreamed."

"The fish is in our net. He cannot escape."

"That depends. He may empty his purse. Something may happen to break our well-laid plans. There is not a minute to lose. The police must be notified at once."

"And anonymously."

"Of course. Come down to the office. Both our heads are needed to manage this information with proper judgment."

They left the room together.

Meanwhile, Harry Foster was proceeding leisurely toward his home, utterly undreaming that he was in the toils of a base and deep-laid conspiracy, which might end in his utter ruin.

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT OF ADVENTURE.

It was not a late hour when Harry Foster reached his rooms. His experience at the Red Hall, much as it might involve, had not taken much time. He flung himself into a chair, and fell into a deep vein of thought. A shadow of uneasiness marked his fine face.

"I am a fool," he muttered. "I should break with those men. I mistrust them all. And I fear that suspicion rests on me already. Association with them may prove fatal.—But Estelle? What mysterious connection has she with them? If she would but break away from that degrading business! Ah! I fear I am so infatuated with that woman, that I would follow her beck to ruin! She is queenly. She is superb. And I am a poor, blind fly caught in the magic light of her glance."

He paused, with a start of surprise. He had just caught sight of a letter, addressed in a familiar hand, on the table before him.

"From her? From Estelle? It must be in answer to mine."

He caught it up eagerly, and pressed it to his lips with a lover's fondness before opening it. He ran his eyes over it with nervous haste, his face changing color more than once in the perusal. We need give here but the essential parts of the long letter. It opened almost immediately, as if the writer's mind was full of the subject, with:

"What you tell me has filled me with horror and amazement. An attempt to open your safe! A woman's finger caught and torn off! Ah! it makes me shudder to think of it! And my opal ring on the finger! Good Heavens, that is extraordinary! You must be mistaken. It is impossible it can be my ring.—And yet, who knows? It disappeared from my jewel casket more than a week ago. One of my servants had left me to go West. To Oregon, she said."

"Did she really go? I always distrusted her. She had been sent for by her brother in Oregon, she said. Perhaps it was her confederate in New York. Could she have stolen the ring and sold it to a pawnbroker?"

Harry laid down the letter and fell into a fit of musing.

"At any rate that clears up my dreadful doubts about Estelle," he muttered. "The girl

may have placed the ring with a fence. That explains its being on the finger of a burglar's sweetheart. And yet that finger looked as if it might have come from the hand of Lady Vere de Vere. Who would have dreamed that any but blue blood had ever run in the veins of that hand?"

He resumed the reading of the letter. A slight start and a change of color came to him as he read a sentence further down the page.

"Don't go to the Red Hall until my return. I have reasons for this request. But I expect you to obey my commands without demanding a reason."

"It comes too late," he said with a smile. "But I will not go again, Estelle."

"My friend here is very sick," continued the letter. "It may be several weeks before I can return. But don't think of coming on. My movements are very uncertain, and I will not have you leave your post at this critical period."

A few more sentences, in which, without words of love, there seemed to show a sentiment of affection, and the letter closed.

Harry pressed it again to his lips. That he was an ardent lover his whole expression displayed. His face burned with a lover's warmth.

"Dear Estelle," he murmured. "It shames me that I could have doubted you for a minute. But the mystery of that Red Hall, and of your connection with those men? You must break from them. You must and shall."

He rose and seized his hat. The atmosphere of the room felt close, and he wished to get into the open air. He thrust the letter into his pocket, and then instantly drew it out again.

"No, no, it is not safe to carry," he remarked. "And she tells me to burn it. That is only prudent. It might involve her in this robbery."

He held it in the flame of the gaslight until it was in a free blaze. Then waiting until only the corner held by his fingers remained he flung the burnt letter in the hearth.

"I've got it in my memory and can spare the paper copy. She loves me. I am sure of that. It speaks through every word of her epistle."

Leaving the house, he walked up and down the street for some time, his mind full of happy thoughts. Then, with a sudden fancy, he took a stage and rode down-town. He left it at Twenty-third street, and turned his steps toward the Opera House.

"It is late," he said, "but the music will quiet me. My head is all in a whirl."

The blaze of lights, the clang and blare of the orchestra, the rich voices of the singers, the gleam of thousands of faces, all seemed like a phantasm to the lover, a glowing accompaniment to the thoughts that were busy in his brain.

It was after midnight when he had left the temple of music and found himself again in the vicinity of his home.

"I should sleep well to-night," he said, as he took the latch-key from his pocket. "I have had an evening full of sensations."

"Harry! Harry Foster!"

He turned at this call. The voice was familiar, and yet it had in it a ring of distress and excitement. He looked into the anxious face that showed itself in the gloom of the street.

"Will Davis!" he called out in surprise. "What is wrong? What do you want with me at this hour?"

"Hush!" said the man in a cautioning tone. "I have waited for you these two hours. I am on the brink of ruin, Harry. I knew no one who would help me, except you. If you refuse, I shall throw myself into the North river!"

"Why, what can be the matter? Do you mean to say that you had any hand in that robbery? Good heavens! Davis, can this be so?"

"No, no! It is not that! Come aside where it is not so public, and I will tell you."

Davis seemed in a state of excitement bordering on despair, as he led Foster to a less public locality. Harry followed, full of wonder. He could not imagine what all this meant.

"Here is a quiet place," he said, decisively. "Now let me hear your story. You carry the key of the bank. Did you let it go out of your possession?"

"It isn't that, I tell you!" exclaimed Davis, in a tone as if he wished to avoid this subject.

"It is nothing about the robbery. The fact is, Harry, I am a fool, and have got myself in an ugly scrape. I borrowed money from my drawer in the bank to invest in a sure thing on the street. Idiot that I was! I have lost!" He struck his head furiously with his fist. "I have no money now to replace it. There will be an examination to-morrow. My discrepancy will be dis-

covered. I will be ruined. And the worst of it is that key. I will be suspected of having a hand in the burglary. Harry Foster, you must save me! If you refuse, I will drown myself."

"Keep cool, my boy. There is no need of all this excitement. How much have you taken? What do you want me to do?"

"Three hundred dollars. Lend me that amount. I will return it out of my salary, and I will bless you forever, Harry, for saving me from the consequences of my first and last crime."

"I didn't think you were such a fool, Will. But I don't want to see you quite go to ruin. If you will solemnly promise—"

"I will take a solemn oath never to speculate again."

"Then I will loan you the money."

Davis, speechless with gratitude, caught Harry's hand and pressed it fervently to his lips.

"There, there, my poor fellow! Do try and calm yourself. You would do as much for me in the same situation. Here, take this. There is about what you want."

He drew from his pocket the roll of bank-notes which comprised his winnings at the gaming house, and which he had carelessly thrust there. These he pressed into Davis's hand.

"Now, not a word. Take it and go home. Try and get some sleep, and level up your head for to-morrow."

"I shall never forget your kindness, Harry," murmured the poor fellow, affected almost to tears. "And I will die rather than try such a game again. One experience of this kind is enough."

"Off with you now, to bed. That is where I am going."

Harry smiled as he again mounted the door-steps and took out his key.

"That same temptation has ruined many a weak-minded simpleton. It would be better for the honor of the country if Wall street were sunk to the bottom of the sea. At any rate, I don't fancy Davis will do it again."

He was humming an air from the opera as he opened the door of his sitting-room. He paused and stood transfixed in surprise.

He had good reason for astonishment. The room was brightly lighted up. Two men sat by the table, both strangers to him, and evidently of a different class of society to that from which he chose his friends. There were indications of confusion about the papers in his desk, as if they had been rudely handled.

"What does this mean?" he sternly demanded. "Who are you? By what right have you taken possession of my room?"

He advanced with a face hot with indignation. "Mr. Harry Foster, isn't it?" asked one of the men.

"I imagine so. Nobody else has a right to intrude here at this hour of the night."

"Then you'll have to excuse us if we've handled things a little rough. Don't often make such late visits, but orders is orders. We'll thank you to show up the contents of your pockets."

"Ha! You are burglars, then?" cried Harry, springing back and seizing the bell-pull. "You are here to rob me?"

"Oh, no!" answered the man, without stirring. "If I was you I wouldn't raise a disturbance. There's nobody knows we are here, except the landlady, and there's no use in letting everybody know it."

Harry dropped his hold of the bell pull and advanced straight toward them. He had changed his mind about their being burglars.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"There is our warrant, Mr. Foster," answered the man, laying an official document on the table. "We are officers of the law, sent here on business. Just read that paper. You will find that it is a search-warrant, regularly issued by Judge Brown. We have completed our search of your room. Now we must search your person."

"A search-warrant!" answered Harry, full of amazement. "To search for what? On what charge? On your lives don't lay a hand on me till this outrage is fully explained!"

"I have no objection to tell you," answered the officer. "I hope, for your sake, there is nothing in it, for it is a mighty awkward business. It seems there was some marked money among that stolen in the Ditson burglary. Now information has been left at the office that some of this marked money has been seen in your possession. We have been directed to make search immediately, before you could possibly dispose of it."

Harry stood the prey of varying emotions. A dozen sensations marked his face. He laugh-

ed scornfully. Then a look of deep indignation colored his brow.

"Here is all I have about me," he hotly exclaimed, emptying his pockets on the table. "There is my pocketbook. You are at liberty to examine its contents. This is an extraordinary outrage."

Paying little attention to his words the two men coolly opened the pocketbook and poured out on the table the bank notes it contained. These they quickly ran over.

"Nothing crooked there," said the speaker, shaking his head.

"Very well. Do you want to examine my person? I am ready to submit."

The officer looked him over from head to foot.

"I think there is no occasion for that, Mr. Foster. We have no reason to think that you have this marked money concealed in your clothing."

"Then tell me what this means," exclaimed Harry, in hot anger. "Who lodged this vile information against me? I demand to be confronted with my accuser!"

"We can tell you nothing, sir. We are not in the secrets of the office. By calling there to-morrow I have no doubt you can obtain full satisfaction. But I believe the information came to the office in a letter."

"Then I must and will see that letter."

"Very well, sir. I presume it will be at your service." The man's voice was polite but cold. There was a strange expression on his face. "One word more before we go. If I were you, when I burned letters and threw the ashes on the hearth, I would take better care to see that there were no unburnt corners left."

Harry looked at him, with a sick feeling at his heart.

"I do not understand you," he faltered. "I wish simply to say that I have picked up a very interesting slip that was not quite burned. There are not many words on it, but they are quite striking."

He held before Harry's face a blackened corner of the burnt letter. The alarmed gentleman looked on it with dilated eyes. It contained parts of two lines.

His startled gaze read the dangerous and accusing words, which by some strange chance had been alone preserved:

"torn off
my opal ring."

The officer looked into the whitened and scared face of the startled gentleman.

"Well, sir, do you feel inclined to explain these words?"

"Not now, or here," cried Harry, hurriedly. "At the proper time and place. Is there anything more?"

"No. We will bid you good-night. And hope you may have pleasant dreams."

His visitors left the room. Harry stood thunderstruck, gazing after them with wildly staring eyes.

"Oh! that terrible chance!" he muttered, despairingly. "How shall it ever be explained? What shall I say if I am questioned? How screen Estelle from this fatal business? I know not! I know not!"

He flung himself in desperation on the bed, and buried his face in the pillows. He was beyond the power of thought.

CHAPTER V.

THE MARKED MONEY.

"I HAVE a few words for your ear, Harry," said Mr. Ditson to Foster, as he entered the bank at a late hour on the morning after the events just recorded. "There was one matter connected with that robbery which I kept from you, and from everybody, by the advice of Mr. Sharp, the detective. But something has occurred this morning of so strange a character that it can no longer be kept secret."

"Ah!" answered Foster, with a shadow of apprehension. "I fancied I knew it all. What new complication has turned up? Anything relating to that finger?"

"No. That remains as deep a mystery as ever. Detective Sharp has done his best, but as yet he is completely off the track. He has his lines thrown out in a hundred directions, but he has caught no fish."

Harry smiled. He would far rather have lost all the money than have a shadow of doubt attach to the lady of his love.

"What is it, then?"

"It is this. Among the money deposited by Jenkins the drover on the day before the robbery there were a number of marked bank-notes. They were some he had received from a

doubtful customer and had marked himself. He told me of this the next day, and described how they were marked. These notes formed part of the stolen money."

"Ha!" exclaimed Harry, impulsively. "That explains, then. I hope you had nothing to do with that outrage. Yet you say it was a secret between you and the detective."

His voice was full of indignation, as he fixed his eyes severely on Mr. Ditson's puzzled face. The banker evidently did not know what to make of those words.

"What are you driving at? What outrage? I don't understand this wild talk."

"Then you are not aware that my rooms were visited and searched last night by law officers, and that I was even obliged to empty my pockets for their inspection? It seems I was charged with having some of these marked notes in my possession."

"By whom? Good heavens! Foster, this is an outrage indeed! I would sooner suspect myself than you. What gave the police the right to make such a search?"

"An anonymous letter, they say. They were informed that I had been seen with some of these notes, and that I might get rid of them unless searched at once. Who sent this anonymous letter, Mr. Ditson, if the affair was the secret you claim?"

"Don't ask me!" cried Mr. Ditson, helplessly. "The thing is getting beyond my depth. It is a complete bundle of mysteries. The matter must have leaked out at the police office, and got into the hands of some of your enemies. Suppose some of the burglars had heard of it, and concealed part of the stolen money in your room, and then made this charge against you? Such things have been done before."

Harry shook his head, with a smile.

"I hardly think that detective Sharp is that sort of a leaky vessel. And besides, no such money was found in my room. I am at a loss to understand the business. I've what, then, did you refer to? What is the strange thing that has happened?"

"See here." Mr. Ditson picked up some bank notes that lay on the table before him, and threw them over to Harry. "Examine the backs of these. Look here in this corner. That is Jenkins's private mark."

"Where did you get these?"

"They were found in the bank this morning."

"Ah! Hidden somewhere?"

"No. They turned up among our regular cash. These are not all. Over two hundred dollars in this money have been found."

Harry sat back in his chair, and looked at Mr. Ditson with a puzzled expression.

"That is very strange," he said.

"I should think so."

"How do you account for it?"

"I have just seen Sharp. I will give you his theory."

"Very well. He should be able to see through a knot-hole."

"It has given him a new view of the case. He is satisfied now that some of our clerks were concerned in the burglary. He thinks they found that their money was marked, and were afraid to dispose of it."

"And what then?"

"They replaced it in the drawers, and took out an equal sum in other money."

Harry drew a long breath.

"That seems to explain it," he remarked.

"But it makes the information against me more mysterious than ever."

"I am not so sure of that."

"Why? Do you see a way through it?"

"It may have been a scheme to lay the suspicion of this returned money on you."

Harry looked at his superior with a startled expression.

"By Heaven, you may be right! But what does Sharp say? I know he doubted me from the first, because I could not look on that bloody finger with the coolness of a butcher. Does he charge me with this?"

"No. The fact is, Harry, we have traced the notes. They all came from Will Davis's desk. This confirms a suspicion which Sharp has all along entertained. Davis carries the key of the bank, and the detective declares that the door was regularly opened by the key. Here we have two very suspicious points against Will Davis."

"It looks so," said Harry thoughtfully. "What have you done? I was delayed this morning, you know, by that Johnson business. But I did not notice Davis as I entered."

"He has been arrested, and taken away."

"Whew! That is sudden. Too sudden, I

feared. I am sure that Will is an honest man. We can't throw every man in prison who is so unlucky as to carry a key. Has Sharp learned anything else suspicious about him?"

"I believe he has. But I don't know just what. He is a very close-mouthed man."

"At any rate the affair is thickening," rejoined Harry. "I confess that I am staggered by that business of the marked notes. Yet any man would be a fool to put such dangerous stuff among his own money. If it was any of our clerks it was some other than Davis. He has left the money in Will's desk to divert suspicion from himself."

"That may be," said Mr. Ditson thoughtfully. "I did not think of that, but it looks reasonable. I will offer that suggestion to Sharp the next time I see him."

"Have you examined the letters this morning?" asked Harry, pointing to a pile of unopened letters.

"Not yet. I have been too busy. You open them, Harry."

He hustled into the bank, leaving Harry in the private office to examine the morning correspondence.

So an hour or two passed. The business of the bank went on as usual. After getting through the rush of the day's business Harry left the bank and proceeded toward the police-station. He was not yet at rest concerning his unpleasant experience of the night before. He felt that he had a right to see that anonymous letter, and it was his purpose to demand a sight of it from the authorities.

One of the first persons he met, on entering the office, was the principal agent in the search of the previous night.

"You wish to see that letter?" remarked this personage, in answer to Harry's demand. "Certainly. You have a right to do so. If you can say who wrote it, you will help us in our work. Come this way, sir."

He led Harry into an inner office. Examining a pile of letters he selected one, which he placed in his hands.

"That is the document. I take it that was written by somebody connected with the burglary. Do you know the handwriting of Davis, the man who was arrested this morning?"

"Yes, perfectly well. He never wrote this," Harry cast his eyes on the document. "I don't recognize the writing."

"We look on it as a disguised hand."

"That may be." He ran his eyes curiously over the perilous document.

It was very short, and undoubtedly written by a skilled penman:

"TO THOSE CONCERNED:—

"I feel it my duty to warn the authorities that some of the marked money of the Ditson & Co. robbery has been seen in the hands of Harry Foster, junior member of the firm. He may get rid of it, and should be searched at once. I write without signature, as I wish to keep out of the affair, while doing my duty by the law. If the authorities are wise they will pay immediate attention to this information."

"It is an infamous business," cried Harry, flinging the letter indignantly to the floor. "Who among my enemies could have written this?"

"Perhaps the same one who wrote the letter of which I found such a curious fragment on your hearth," said the officer, fixing his eyes on Harry's face. "I judge you will be called on to explain that strange document."

"Very well," answered Harry haughtily. "Please hand it to Detective Sharp. I will explain it to him. I am as anxious as he to unfold this robbery, and if I can throw any light on it whatever I am fully ready."

"Mr. Sharp has it already," said the officer coldly. "Do you wish me?"

This was said to a messenger who had appeared at the door. The officer walked over to him, and a short conversation followed. He then turned again to Harry.

"It seems that Davis, the prisoner, is anxious for an interview with you, Mr. Foster. Do you wish to see him?"

"I don't know what he can want with me. However, as I am on the ground—"

"Please follow this man, then. He will take you to him."

Very soon afterward Harry found himself in a corridor of the Tombs. A cell door was opened by the attendant.

"You will find him in there, Mr. Foster."

"Mr. Foster?"

This came in an exclamation from the occupant of the cell, who sprang forward, revealing the face of Will Davis, already haggard and hopeless.

"Will, I am very sorry to see you here," said Harry feelingly, as he caught the prisoner's hand in a strong grasp.

The cell door was closed behind him. Davis threw himself despairingly on the bed.

"I wish I had not seen you last night!" he passionately declared. "I wish I had flung myself into the river! Then I would have escaped this disgrace! I thought you were saving me, Mr. Foster. Instead of that you were ruining me."

"What do you mean?" demanded Harry sternly. Then in a quieter voice he continued: "I don't understand this, Will, but it can't be so bad. You have only to deny that you put that money in your drawer, and declare that some one else must have put it there to lay suspicion on you. I don't believe you did it. I have every trust in your honesty, my poor fellow."

Davis listened to these words with an expression of angry amazement. He rose as Harry concluded, and stood staring at him with the wild look of a madman.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, "do you ask me to do that? You?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"But you know I did put the money there myself. You know it well, for you gave it to me. It was the money you gave me last night, to replace the cash I had lost in speculation."

Harry, who had been sitting in an easy attitude, with a look of friendly sympathy, started as if he had been stung by a concealed scorpion. A look of horror came over his countenance.

"The money I gave you? The marked money among that? You lie! You are insane! It is impossible!"

He made a step forward, as if he would have taken his accuser by the throat.

"It is true, for all that," answered Davis, in a firm tone. "I asked you to save me. You have destroyed me."

"Great God!" cried Harry, as a flood of recollections came upon his brain. "Have I been standing on the brink of a precipice?"

All the events of the preceding night stood like a picture before his eyes. The anonymous information; the men waiting to search him; the mere chance of his charitable loan to his fellow-clerk, which had saved him from the ruinous consequences of some dark conspiracy. Then he asked himself where he had got this money. He remembered the gambling scene. But there he had only won back what he had previously lost. He was sure he had taken no money but his own from that room. How came the marked money in his pocket, then? Had it been slipped there by some enemy who wished to ruin him? All this passed in a whirl through his brain. He could come to no conclusion. Only one thing was clear to him. Estelle had warned him not to enter the Red Hall in her absence.

"What is to be done?" asked Davis, pitifully. "You know you gave it to me. Are you going to deny it, and destroy me?"

"I know nothing of the kind," said Harry, with some show of composure. "It seems impossible that I could have had such money about me. You must be mistaken."

"I am not mistaken. The marked money was part of that you gave me."

"I cannot understand it, then. And suppose I should say I gave you money to replace what you had purloined for speculation—would that help you?"

"No, no!" cried Davis, his look of hope changing to despair. "I forgot that. I am encircled with ruin. Turn where I will I cannot escape from it." He flung himself on the bed despairingly.

"It is not so bad as you imagine," answered Harry. "Do as I have advised and you will be safe. Declare that you know nothing about the marked money, and cannot explain how it came on your desk. Say that it must have been placed there by some other hands, in exchange for good money. In spite of all you have said it is possible you have been deceived. I deny all knowledge of the marked money."

Harry was getting full of the spirit of fight. If a secret foe was planning his ruin he was not likely to find an easy prey.

"I don't know," exclaimed the weak-nerved prisoner. "The key is against me. Everything is against me."

"But what if you had the key? You did not open the door for the burglars. The key did not leave your possession."

"If I could only be sure of that!"

Harry turned sharply on the nerveless prisoner, who was wringing his hands in utter dismay.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I scarce dare say! That woman! That siren! That fiend! Has she lured me to my ruin? Stay, I will tell you all."

These words sent a host of rapid thoughts through Harry's brain. That woman! What woman? Had the woman who had lost her finger somehow lured the key from this weakling? He waited in anxious curiosity for the promised explanation.

But at this moment the door of the cell opened and the keeper appeared.

"The time is up, sir."

"Let me have five minutes more. We are not quite through with our business."

"I am sorry, but it cannot be done. The visiting hours are over. You must call again if you have more to say."

"Very well, if it must be. Good-by, Will. Keep up a stout heart, old fellow. It is not so black as it looks. All will come out right, depend on it. I will come to-morrow."

"Good-by," answered Will, in a faltering tone. He was plainly in a deeply depressed condition.

An avenue of hope opened before Harry's mind as he walked away. He began to see a clear vista before him. This woman that Davis had spoken of. Let him once get on her track, and he felt sure of unearthing the dark mystery of the severed finger.

CHAPTER VI.

FOSTER HAS AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DETECTIVE.

We must pass over a period of more than a month from the date of our last chapter. During that period little of interest to our story had occurred. Davis was still in prison, under commitment for trial. But he had become sullen and gloomy, and utterly refused to give the promised information to Harry Foster. He seemed to have become suspicious of Harry, and acted as if he believed that the marked money had been put upon him purposely. Yet he was shrewd enough to keep silence, under the assurance that there was not enough evidence to convict him.

As for Detective Sharp, he was yet very much in the dark. All his investigations had led to blind trails, and not a trace of the burglars had yet been found. He had done his best to connect Foster, whom he suspected, with the affair, but so far without result. The only doubtful incidents he could discover were Foster's emotion on discovery of the severed finger, his leaving the bank at an unusually early hour on the afternoon of the robbery, and the fragment of the burned letter, which had been handed him.

In reference to the latter, Harry did not wait to be sent for by the detective, but frankly sought him in his office.

"I wish to talk with you about that scrap of a letter which was found in my room," he openly announced. "The words on it must have struck you as very significant, and it certainly needs some explanation."

The detective looked up from his writing, with an expression of face as if the call was something of a surprise to him.

"It is peculiar, to say the least," he dryly remarked.

"The fact is, Mr. Sharp," resumed Harry, in a very frank tone, "I do know something about that opal ring. I have been undertaking a little detective work on my own account. But as long as you know so much, it is best that I should have the advantage of your experience."

Mr. Sharp looked interested.

"I thought something of the sort," he quietly answered. "I have been waiting for you to show your hand."

"I recognized that ring at sight," acknowledged Harry. "I knew it for the property of a lady friend of mine."

"Ah! Then it was not the sight of blood that ailed you?"

"I am not quite so weak as that."

"I thought so," Mr. Sharp's manner expressed great interest in his visitor.

"The friend I speak of is in Boston, where she has been since before the date of this robbery. I wrote to her for information concerning her ring. The scrap of a letter you possess is part of her answer. I burned it, as I do all private letters from lady friends. It is an old habit of mine."

"Was she the lady who left New York on the afternoon before the burglary, and whom you accompanied to the cars?"

Harry looked hastily up, while a deep color came to his face.

"Who told you that? You learned it from Mr. Ditson?"

"What does that matter?"

"Nothing. Only I deny his right to repeat my confidences. Otherwise, it is a matter of little importance."

"But this is of great importance," said Mr. Sharp, significantly touching the burnt scrap which he had taken from a drawer of the table. "I shall be glad to hear all you wish to say about it. You were wrong in burning that letter, Mr. Foster."

"I was wrong in not completing my job," answered Harry, with a laugh. "Ill luck picked out the very worst parts of the letter to preserve. As I cannot show you the original, the best I can do is to offer you a copy of it. I have written to my friend, telling her of the unlucky accident, and she has rewritten that part of her letter as well as she can remember it. As I wish to take you into my full confidence in this affair, I have brought you her letter."

He produced from his pocket an envelope with the Boston post-mark, and took from it a letter which he unfolded and handed to the detective. The latter quietly received it, and cast his eyes over it without speaking.

He continued to look at it thoughtfully for several minutes after receiving it.

"That has a truthful sound," he said at length. He took up the scorched scrap and compared the handwriting. "I see the lady is not pleased with your burning her letters. Who is this Estelle Laurent?"

"A friend of mine," answered Harry, coldly. "On her return to New York, which she says will very soon occur, I shall take the opportunity to let you have an interview with her. I wanted to keep her out of this affair, if possible, but the interests of justice must be answered."

"Her name need not be made public in connection with it. But this is highly important, Mr. Foster. Why did you not ask her for a list of the inmates of her house at the time her ring was lost? And particularly the servant she suspects. It is necessary that I should know all about this woman, her appearance, her antecedents, everything. Write again at once, and ask for full information. We have a clew here that may be worked up to some effect."

"Had we not better wait to see Miss Laurent personally?"

"No. Precious time has been lost now by your vain efforts to play the detective. Every man to his business, is my motto. An hour's delay may ruin all. Write at once."

"I will do so. By the way, Mr. Sharp, how does your case look? Have you struck any clew at all?"

"None worth speaking of, except that relating to Davis, and the marked money."

"Davis is an honest man," said Harry positively. "And he is not a fool. If he wanted to get rid of stolen money, he would hardly have done so by exchanging it for other money on his own desk."

"Then you suspect some of the other clerks?" Mr. Sharp fixed his eyes on him inquiringly.

"I suspect nobody."

"Davis carried the key to the bank," rejoined Mr. Sharp. "So far as I can discover that door was opened by the key on the night of the burglary."

"Then you suspect him? You have learned something about him?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me what? I have something to tell you in return. I have some reasons to think that Davis has been made the victim of certain sharpers."

"Ah! Then we will exchange information. So far I have simply learned that he has speculated to some extent, and that he has lost money. No great amount, but more than his salary would warrant."

Harry changed color. This matter was coming close to himself.

"In the second place," continued the detective, "he had been keeping very irregular hours, for some time before the robbery. On the night the bank was opened he did not return home until after midnight. That is all I have so far learned. He seems to have had no companion in these movements."

"He must be made to speak!" cried Harry energetically. "I begin to see it all now. I recognize the meaning of his rambling words. He has been made the tool of that woman pal of the burglars; the one who stole the ring. She has fascinated and robbed him."

"Please explain. We were to exchange information."

Harry proceeded to relate what he had learned during his visit to Davis's cell, and his suspicion that some artful woman had lured from him the key.

"The siren; the fiend; these were his com-

plimentary names for her. He had a story to tell, but the too hasty return of the keeper prevented my hearing it. Since then I have endeavored in vain to make him speak. He has grown sullen and morose."

"All this is of great interest, Mr. Foster. I begin to see my way clear."

"I am ready to hand Davis over to you. Perhaps you can find some means to make him speak."

"I can try. We have various ways of dealing with obstinate men."

"I have my theory of the burglary," said Harry. "I hardly think that the person who stole Miss Laurent's ring kept it. Such things are dangerous keepsakes. I am inclined to think it has been sold or pawned, and thus fallen into the hands of some burglar's sweetheart. Yet it was no ordinary woman who owned that finger, who lured Will Davis to his ruin, and who boldly accompanied the burglars in their dangerous work."

"That is certain. Yet your theory sounds very plausible. I shall see what can be learned from Davis. I am much obliged for the information you have given me, Mr. Foster, and wish it had been given sooner. Yet it may not be too late."

"I could not speak at first," explained Harry. "I was in a cruel maze of doubt and horror. The sight of that ring completely upset me. I knew, of course, that a lady like Miss Laurent was above suspicion, yet I was overwhelmed by the strangeness of the incident, and by the appearance of the finger, which might well have been that of a lady. Her explanation has wonderfully relieved my mind."

"Without it you would not have spoken?"

"I would have died rather than compromise her."

"Then she is more than a mere acquaintance?"

"Yes. I may admit that to you."

"I can understand your feeling, Mr. Foster. And I thank you for your frankness. I will do my best to keep Miss Laurent's name out of this ugly business."

"Thank you. I will esteem that a personal favor."

In a few minutes more Harry took his leave. The detective remained in a deep study, his head on his hand, his eyes fixed on the scrap of paper. For nearly a half-hour he sat thus, apparently lost in a reverie.

"Can it be that there are two dupes in this affair?" he asked himself. "Will Davis and Harry Foster? Who is this Estelle Laurent? Is that a Spanish name? At any rate it can do no harm to ask some questions about her."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE BOUDOIR OF THE COUNTESS.

"I AM home. I arrived last night. Shall be glad to see you as early as you can make it convenient to call. I am eager both to see you, and to hear what has been learned about that burglary. You don't know what a fascination that subject has for me since you have connected my ring with it, and told me that horrible story of the cut-off finger."

"E. L."

This note Harry Foster found at his rooms, on his return from the bank on an afternoon several days after his interview with the detective.

The letter threw him into a flutter of excitement, while the color came and went in his speaking face.

"Home again! It has been hard for me to endure her absence. Only her positive command, and the danger of leaving home just now, has kept me from seeking her in Boston. You need not fear, Estelle, that I will be long in responding to this welcome invitation."

He seized his hat and left the house in impatient haste. There was a warmth on his eyes that clearly told the story of his lover-like errand.

His steps took him straight to the Red Hall, a place he had not visited since the evening of his gambling experience. Nor had he seen his gambling companions since that date. He had avoided them, and they seemed to have equally avoided him.

As he went a host of thoughts passed through his active brain. A suspicion which had been growing in his mind became stronger as he reflected on the incidents of that gambling match. Where had the money come from that he had loaned Will Davis? Had these men played any trick on him? But if that money came from them what did it involve? Were they the burglars?

And Estelle? What were her relations with these men? There was some strange mystery surrounding her which he had never probed.

All he knew was that she was a stranger in New York, that she was the mistress of a private gambling saloon, and that she bore special relations to the men with whom he had played. It was they who had brought him, and others with money to lose, to her saloon.

He merely knew besides this that she was fascinating, and that he loved her with the warmest feeling of his soul.

"You will find Miss Laurent in her boudoir, Mr. Foster," said the servant. "She has instructed me to send you up, if you should call."

"Thank you."

It was with a fluttering heart that the lover reached the door that concealed the lady of his love. He knocked with a faltering hand.

"Come in," spoke a voice, in a silvery tone that made his every nerve thrill.

He opened the door. Before him was a small but richly-furnished room, the light entering it through deeply-curtained windows. A pale rose tint here replaced the crimson hue that marked every other visible part of this strange house. All was soft, delicate, and rich, and full of indications of a cultivated female taste.

Yet Harry's eyes saw none of this. He saw only the stately form of the woman who rose quickly, on his entrance, from the silken cushions of the sofa on which she had been reclining.

She was tall and full-formed, yet very graceful in figure, and with a face that seemed to unite the rich beauty of Venus with the proud haughtiness of Diana. It was no ordinary face, that Grecian-cut countenance, with its high nostrils, its deep black eyes, and the winning curves of the proud mouth.

Yet now the distilled rose-tints of the curtains seemed to give an unwonted softness to the countenance, which deepened into a blush of welcome as Foster hastened with an ardent step across the room, his face warm with excitement.

She extended to him her daintily-gloved hands. A soft smile curved her crimson lips.

"Estelle!"

"Harry! You are a good boy to come so soon."

"I got your note, and flew to see you. I could not bear to lose a moment."

He drew her toward him. She yielded to his ardent impulse. His lips met hers in a kiss of love, the first which he had dared to impress upon them.

The proud woman rested for a moment in his arms, with a warm flush of happiness upon her face. Then she drew herself erect with a start, while an expression of pain and regret crossed her countenance.

She withdrew from his half-embrace and stepped quickly back.

"We are playing the fool," she said, in a voice of strange modulation. "I fancy we have both let ourselves be surprised into a folly that had better not be repeated."

"Why not?" demanded Harry, in indignant protest.

"For good reasons, Harry Foster. Sit, and let us be rational again. I did not think I could yield to such weakness."

She seated herself on the sofa, while Harry drew up a chair close beside her. He sought again to take her hand, but she withdrew it, while a look of cool decision crossed her countenance.

"Why do you repel me?" he murmured. "You know how I love you. I hoped—I was sure it was returned."

"That subject is forbidden," she quietly answered. "What I might have said and thought, had fate been different, need not be discussed now. As it is, there are reasons, which I am not at liberty to mention, that preclude all thought of love between you and me."

A look of pain that was almost anguish marked her lips for a moment, but it was instantly driven from the proud lines of that self-reliant countenance.

"Yet you yielded to my kiss just now."

"I was weak then. All women are subject to their weak moments. I am strong now. You do not know how strong I can be, Harry Foster."

"I think you can be strong enough to break my heart and your own too, and never show a trace of it in that proud face," he half-angrily replied. "But what need of our being martyrs? There can be nothing in your life to hinder my loving you. I cannot and will not believe that."

"Will you cease talking about it?" she demanded, rising to her feet and looking down upon him from all her stately height. "Fool that I was to give way to such weakness! I forbid you to mention the subject again if you wish to see me more." Despite her proud look,

her hands were clasped with a pressure that indicated some sharply-repressed feeling. "Let us change the subject," she continued, with a forced laugh. "We have lived long enough to learn wisdom. Tell me all about the severed finger and the ring. I am dying with curiosity."

Sue seated herself, and laid her slender gloved hand on his. He looked at the tapering fingers, that swelled so firmly through the closely-fitting glove, and laughed at the momentary fear he had once felt that the lost finger had been hers.

"I have told you the most of it now, by letter," he said.

"Oh, but I want all the fine details. Tell me all about it. Who is suspected? What are the police doing? You don't know how I am interested."

"There seems to be but two persons suspected. One of these is a clerk of the firm, one Will Davis, who is now in prison on the charge of being connected with the burglary."

A slight change of expression crossed the face of the listener on hearing this name, but it was instantly banished.

"The other suspected person is one Harry Foster, your very humble servant."

"You suspected? You, Harry? No, no, you are deceiving me! That is impossible!"

She started from her easy reclining attitude as she spoke, while her expressive face filled with dread and anxiety.

"Was it that letter?" she continued, excitedly. "To think of you burning a letter, and not having the wit to burn it all!"

"It was partly that," replied Harry, coolly. "But wait, I will tell you the whole story."

Seating himself in an easier attitude he proceeded to do so, relating all that had occurred, from the first discovery of the burglary to the date of his last interview with the detective. Yet he left out two particulars from the story, his visit to the Red Hall, and his loan to Will Davis.

Estelle heard this recital with an emotion which only her interest in the narrator could have explained. It is true that the description of the finding of the mangled finger might well have brought a shudder of horror to the strongest frame. She turned deathly pale and covered her face with her hands, as he told the horrible story.

"And the sight of my ring, and the resemblance of the finger to mine, sickened you? I don't wonder. Go on. Say no more about this, however, or I shall faint. You don't know how terrible a story you make of it."

She looked, indeed, as if she was on the verge of fainting. Her lips trembled violently under the ghostly smile which she called to them. Harry caught in his her unresisting hand, and gave it a reassuring pressure, as he proceeded.

Her next display of deep interest was called out by his vivid narrative of the search of his room by the police, and the discovery of the burnt fragment of the letter. He proceeded to relate the arrest of Will Davis, and the discovery of the marked money in his possession.

She sprang half-upright at this, with a look of deep astonishment. A broken exclamation came from her lips, but she repressed it, and said with a forced smile:

"You don't know how your story excites me. It is better than a romance. Proceed. I am eager to hear it to the end."

He continued with his visit to the police office, and his interview with Davis in his cell. When he came to the point where the latter spoke of the woman who had deceived him a strange look came upon Estelle's face. There was a glitter in her eyes like that of an aroused tigress. Evidently deep feelings were working beneath the enforced calm of her demeanor.

Some broken words came from her lips. But they died away in inarticulate murmur.

"What did you say, Estelle? I did not catch it."

"No matter. You have excited me so that I do not know what I am saying. What followed? Did the wretched coward reveal the woman's name?"

"No. We were interrupted. I have tried since to learn it from him, but he will not speak. His mood of confidence has changed. But he must and shall speak. I have taken the detective into my confidence. He shall be forced to tell the woman's name. There is no doubt that it was she who wore your ring, and lost her finger."

Estelle looked in a dangerous mood at that moment. Her eyes were fixed on the speaker with an expression of fury which he failed to perceive. A gulping sound came from her lips as she forced back the hot words that struggled for utterance.

"You told it to the detective!" she cried, with sudden energy. "What else did you tell him? Probably, in your weak frankness, you have managed to double the suspicion against yourself!"

"Don't be so excited, Estelle," said Harry, with a smile. "There is nothing to call for it. I am in no special danger, though I am glad you take such interest in my welfare."

"I cannot help it," she exclaimed. "Was there anything more?"

"Yes. The most surprising thing of all." His voice grew hard and cold. "Can you imagine where Davis got that marked money, Estelle?"

"No. How could I guess that? I am no hand at riddles." A feverish flush marked her face, as she said this in a tone of forced pleasantry.

"He received it from my hand."

"From your hand!" She started forward, and looked into his face with horror and amazement.

"Yes. You are astounded that I should have these notes. Can you imagine where I got them? Certainly not from the safe of Ditson & Co."

"You are trifling with me," she declared, though a shiver ran through all her frame.

"I am in sound earnest. I visited the Red Hall in your absence, Estelle."

"What? After my positive desire?"

"Before it. Your letter came too late. I did not know then the reason of your command. I know now."

"You do?" Her voice was very faint.

"Yes. It was to guard me against the villainous tricks of the *habitués* of your saloon. I was inveigled by Paul Clifford into a game. I lost at first, and then won. What did I win? The marked money which I afterward loaned to Will Davis! You look horrified and incredulous, Estelle, yet I tell you but the truth. Do you know the character of these men, your mysterious associates? Do you know that they are criminals, that it was they who made their way into the bank of Ditson & Co., and stole from it this lost money?"

"It is false!" she cried. "There is some mistake! They cannot be such fools!" Her face was terrible in its intensity of emotion. He gazed at her in wonder. He had never dreamed that such fierce passion could dwell in a woman's frame. "You must be wrong. They may have won the money at cards. Or it may have been put in your pocket by other hands. You are accusing these men wildly and wrongfully."

"How came it then that immediately afterward an anonymous letter was sent to the police office, accusing me of having some of the stolen money in my possession? When I went home that night I found officers in my room, waiting to search me. Only the fortunate chance of my lending money to Will Davis saved me from ruin. He is in prison in my place. But at any time he may speak out, and force me to replace him in his cell. I tell you, there was a deep-laid plot to ruin me, which only failed by the merest chance, and that these strange associates of yours, Paul Clifford, and Juan Vernel, were at the bottom of it. They are the burglars, Estelle. Only that I wanted to speak to you first I would have denounced them before now. They are associated with the woman who stole your ring. Perhaps they stole it themselves, and gave it to her. They may have wished to ruin you and me together."

"No, no," she answered, with a strange smile. "There is no fear of that."

"Why not? What is the strange link that binds you to such men? Why are you associated with them in this disreputable business? Speak, I have the right to know."

"You have no right to know anything about me which I do not choose to tell you," she haughtily replied. "As for these men, you are mistaken, that is all."

"I am not mistaken. I can tell you, if you wish to know, why they have sought to convict me of this robbery."

"Why?" she asked, with an intense look.

"Because—you will let me speak the truth, Estelle?"

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"Because they look on us as lovers. Because they know that I love you, and fancy that you return my love. Because Paul Clifford wants you for himself, and is ready to take any measures to get a favored rival out of his way. He would kill me as he would a dog, if he dared."

Her face expressed a thousand emotions as he spoke. A deep indignation and resolve slowly

grew upon it. An earnest light shone from her glowing eyes.

"He shall go no further!" she passionately exclaimed. "I do love you, Harry Foster! You are the only man I ever loved! There!"—she waved him back—"let that suffice. Our paths lie far asunder. We can never wed. As for these men, I hate them more than you can. I hate and fear them. Go no further in this investigation, if you love me, as you say you do. Leave it to me. I have means of investigation which you know not of. Believe me I would like nothing better than to hand them over to the police— If I dared," she repeated to herself, in a shuddering whisper.

Harry looked at her with an earnest attention, his eyes beaming with a happy luster at her open declaration.

"I will trust you, Estelle."

"You can. But go now. Leave me. I have much to do, much to think of. A terrible path opens before me. Leave me now, Harry. We will see each other soon again."

CHAPTER VIII.

A ROCK IN THE CHANNEL.

It was the afternoon succeeding that of Harry Foster's interview with Estelle Laurent. He had not yet recovered from the effects of this interview. She loved him; she had admitted it. Yet she declared that she could never wed him. Some dark mystery overhung her life. She was the associate of men whom he now believed to be burglars and villains of the deepest dye. What was her link of connection with these men? He was determined to discover. The very thought of losing her was torture to his soul. He would confront his enemies, charge them with their crimes, and force them to tell the truth, or consign them to the hands of justice.

He had but fairly come to this conclusion when he found himself suddenly face to face with Sharp, the detective, whose eyes were fixed on him with a peculiar gaze.

"Well met," he exclaimed. "You are the very man I want to see. Come in here, I have some words for your ears."

He led the way into the hotel, in front of which they met. Entering the conversation room they took chairs in an unoccupied corner.

"What is it?" asked Harry curiously. "Anything new turned up?"

"Yes. I have succeeded where you failed. I have made Davis speak."

"Ah!" cried Harry, with sudden interest. "Then we are on the track indeed! He has told the woman's name, and where she may be found?"

"He has told all he knew," answered Sharp, in the same peculiar tone. "The story is not a long one. Shall I relate it?"

"Why not? I am anxious to hear."

"It seems, then, that this woman took rooms at the house at which Davis boards. She was remarkably handsome, or so he thought her. A tall, stately, perfect form, a high-bred face, haughty to strangers, but winning to her friends." Sharp's eyes were fixed on Harry's face, which slightly changed color at this description. "To make a long story short, she admitted Davis into the circle of her friends. Made a dead set at him, I fancy. He seems to have been infatuated with the woman. She left the house finally, and moved to another residence. But he was permitted to visit her. He even received notes of invitation."

"And you think all this was a trap to catch a fool?"

"It certainly was," answered the detective dryly. "On the day of the robbery he received such an invitation. The lady was very kind to him. They had a little private supper. Just what they ate I am not aware, but some of their viands must have been of a sleepy nature, for Davis soon fell into a sound sleep, in spite of his efforts to keep awake. He slept, indeed, till after midnight. When he came to himself he was on the street in charge of a man who left him as soon as his senses began to return. He went home with a swimming head."

"And you think this was a trick to obtain the key?"

"There can be no doubt of it."

"He found it in his pocket?"

"Yes. It was returned when the work was done. He did not dream of what had happened, until after the discovery of the burglary. He was still infatuated with the woman. Quite likely too he had some thoughts of his own safety. He determined to hold his tongue."

"A wise resolve, under the circumstances."

But the woman? Have you found her? What have you done?"

"That kind are not easily found," answered Sharp, with a knowing smile. "I have visited the house. They know nothing of her. She has not been seen since that night."

"She was the woman who lost her finger!" cried Harry, with great interest. "She must be traced! Have you any clew?"

"One only. Her note of invitation to Will Davis."

"But how can that help you?"

"A handwriting is sometimes the best of guides," said Sharp significantly.

"Ah! I see. You recognize it?"

"It looks familiar. Perhaps you may know it."

He handed a sheet of daintily perfumed paper over to Harry, and settled back easily in his chair, his eyes seemingly fixed on the ceiling. Harry took it, and cast his eyes on it rather indifferently. A sudden exclamation came from his lips.

"Good Heavens! that writing! Is it—can it be, Estelle?"

"You recognize it, then? I fancied you would."

"Is this a trap you have laid for me?" demanded Harry, indignantly.

"Oh, no! Only a detective dodge. I have some other words in the lady's handwriting, you know. Do you think this is the woman who lost her finger?"

"This is folly!" cried Harry, in a fit of anger. "I would as soon accuse myself of burglary as Estelle Laurent. What is more, she was not in the city. I saw her myself aboard the Boston Express at four o'clock that afternoon."

"She could easily have been back at eight o'clock that night," answered the detective, quietly. "Even Express trains have their stoppages."

"You have taken a most ridiculous idea, I tell you!" exclaimed Harry, impulsively. "She is in the city now. I saw her last night. I held both her hands in mine. They are as sound and whole as yours. You will have to seek another clew, Mr. Sharp. It is easy to be mistaken in a handwriting."

"You are sure of this?" There was a shadow of disappointment in the detective's tone. "Her hands are whole? Then the mystery is deeper than I supposed."

"I will bring her to see you. This matter must be settled. Her reputation shall rest under no such stigma."

"Where does she live? I will call on her."

"That is not necessary. I prefer the other course," answered Harry.

He had his reasons for not introducing an agent of the police into Estelle's house. He did not care to make public the disreputable business of the woman he loved. That her associates had some connection with the burglary he now felt sure. But he was equally sure that she had been their dupe. He was determined to bring them to justice, and to relieve Will Davis from the trouble into which he had unwittingly thrown him.

But first, he must take measures to screen Estelle. He would have told his suspicions to the detective but for fear of involving her in some unknown trouble. He secretly determined to continue the investigation by himself.

In pursuance of this resolution he made his way up-town, after parting with the detective. He was aware of the residence of his foes, and was determined to beard them to their faces.

A half-hour brought him to the street and house where, on a former occasion, Paul Clifford had called on Juan Vernel. The servant showed him up-stairs to the same room. The thin-lipped occupant of the room was there alone. He rose with a rather startled air on seeing his visitor, but immediately recovered his equanimity, and advanced with outstretched hand.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said. "I am glad to see you, Mr. Foster. You have strangely vanished for the last month."

Harry walked sternly forward, ignoring the offered hand. He turned and faced his suave host.

"I had good reason," he remarked, briefly. "Our last game warned me that I was playing with unsafe antagonists."

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed Juan.

"Are you here to insult me?"

"You are at liberty to take my words in any shape you please. But I might safely ask you where you got those marked notes which you so generously suffered me to win."

"Marked notes?" cried Juan, with a look of utter surprise.

"Just so."

"You are rambling, sir, or you have lost your wits."

"I have found them, perhaps. I am wide-awake enough now to recognize you and your companions as sharpers and blacklegs. You played a neat game on me, but the game is not ended yet. You have had your deal. It is mine now."

The sallow face of the gambler had grown whiter during these words. A tigerish glare burned in his eyes. He thrust his hand behind him as if in search of a weapon.

"You lie! you scoundrel!" he hissed. "I will have your life's blood for this insult!"

"Drop that weapon, Juan Vernel. Two can play at that game. I have not come here unprepared."

In an instant the muzzle of a revolver covered the head of the detected gamester. There was an eye behind it that meant business. With a fierce curse Juan withdrew his hand from his pistol pocket.

"Leave my room!" he fiercely exclaimed. "If you stay a minute longer I shall send for force to have you expelled."

"For the police, I presume," sneered the visitor. "You are welcome to do so. I should like the opportunity of telling them that story of the marked money, and of where it came from."

His eyes were closely fixed on the face of the gambler, but not a trace of emotion appeared there. The thin lips were curled in disdain.

"Suppose I tell them of the burglary at Ditson & Co.'s bank, and of the marked notes that were among the booty? Suppose I give them the names of the burglars? An innocent man is in prison now, on the charge of having these notes in his possession. Do you imagine I will let him suffer to screen scoundrels like you?"

"I fancy you are slightly beside yourself, Harry Foster," was the quiet reply. "As for screening scoundrels, you seem to have kept quiet so far to screen yourself. Acknowledge, if you will, that you gave that money to Davis. Do you think the police will swallow your cock-and-bull story of winning it at cards? They are hardly such fools as that. You had best reconsider your determination."

His tone was insolently polite. There was a sneering disdain in his eyes at which Harry chafed.

"I will take the consequences," he loudly declared. "You entered a conspiracy to ruin me. You sent that anonymous information to the police. Only a lucky chance kept me from falling into your trap. I am a fool to come here and bandy words with you. I should have denounced you at once."

"You are quite at liberty to do so," answered the collected villain. "Suppose I should acknowledge to you that I committed the burglary you speak of? Would you be any better off then? I am hardly the man to do work of that kind and leave an open track."

Harry looked at his composed face with a dubious glance.

"You have left more evidence than you imagine," he declared. "That tell-tale finger with its ring will expose yet. The police are already on the track of your woman confederate, of her who got the key from Davis, and left her finger in the safe door."

A momentary start, instantly repressed, showed that these words had struck home. A look of hard resolution came to the gambler's face.

"Ha!" he sneered. "Who then do you imagine this woman to be?"

"I shall be able to tell you soon! Some confederate of yours, to whom you gave the opal ring stolen from Estelle Laurent."

"You think so, eh? Have you asked the Countess her opinion of this matter?"

"I have asked Miss Laurent," answered Harry sternly. "She believes it was stolen by a servant. I have my own theory about who stole it."

"You have asked her so much, suppose you ask her one thing more," retorted Juan, with a look of strange meaning. "Ask her why she wears gloves to receive company."

Harry started as if he had been thunder-struck. These significant words had suddenly filled him with dismay and terror.

"Villain!" he cried. "Liar! knave! If you belie that woman, I will have your heart's blood if I have to tear you asunder with my two hands!"

"Very well, sir. But I would rather you would not rouse the house now with your insane cries. I should like to have my room to myself, if you do not object."

Harry stood glaring at him, a host of feelings

rushing through his distracted brain. For one moment he seemed about to spring upon him, and the villain braced himself for the encounter. Then, with a new impulse, he turned and ran from the room, crying fiercely:

"You shall answer for this! You have had your day, villain!"

Juan looked after him, with a sneer of deep cunning on his face.

"Not yet, I fancy," he said to himself. "You don't know the man you are dealing with, Harry Foster. Estelle has lost her head through her fancy for this fellow. She must be roused to a sense of her danger. He will find yet that there is the spirit of a tigress under that satin skin. Let him go to the Red Hall! He may not find it so easy to leave there. Fool as he is, he has kept his suspicions to himself. He shall never have the opportunity to reveal them to the detective police."

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHAMBER OF BLUEBEARD.

NIGHT had again fallen on the great city. Crime again stalked abroad under cover of the darkness. Into the building known to its frequenters as the Red Hall person after person entered, most of them in a secret manner, as if anxious to avoid recognition.

Within the gambling-room several card-parties were at work, the most of them engaged in deep play. They were mainly rich young fools about town, who had been lured thither by the arts of Paul Clifford and his confederates.

Estelle Laurent was present in all her stately beauty, her floating silken robes in striking contrast to the dead black of the gentlemen's attire.

She passed from table to table, dropping a word here and there, dispensing winning smiles to certain soft-brained youths, using her wondrous beauty as a lure to draw the wealthy fools into the net of her dangerous trade.

She was greeted with many words of welcome and congratulation on her return by those who had not before seen her since her journey.

Paul Clifford and Juan Vernel stood apart in the embrasure of a window, looking on her with satisfied glances.

"The Countess is superb to-night," said Paul. "She is more queenly than ever. 'It was a fortunate day for us, Juan, when we got such a woman in our power.'"

"Yes," answered Juan, a little distractedly. "And we must keep her so. She is chafing against the traces. Why does not that blind dupe come? Can it be that he has changed his mind?"

"He is not the kind that change easily," answered Paul. "Is all ready?"

"Yes, I have seen to every detail."

"Then— But here he comes now. There must be no weakness when the moment arrives."

"There shall be none with me."

Foster had indeed entered at that moment. He walked forward with his proud step, his eyes seeking the form of the mistress of the saloon. A quiet greeting passed between them. He had evidently schooled himself to composure.

"Can I have a private interview with you, Estelle?" he took an opportunity of asking.

"Not now," she answered hurriedly. "Wait till the people have gone; I cannot leave here now."

Harry walked about discontentedly, looking at the games. He bit his lips with a nervous anxiety, which he had difficulty to control. His eyes involuntarily wandered to Estelle's tapering hands. They were still gloved, yet their graceful completeness made him involuntarily smile at the suspicion which had been implanted in his fancy. He was now fully satisfied, that for some purpose of his own, Juan Vernel had lied.

Finally, he took part in a game, as some relief to his nervous impatience. He played with reckless carelessness, yet he won with every turn of the cards. He hardly knew how his winnings were heaping up before him until his antagonist rose with angry haste.

"Deuce take the luck!" he exclaimed. "With what magic have you anointed your fingers, Foster, that they touch only the winning cards? I'll play no more to-night."

"Pure indifference, I judge," answered Harry, as he gathered up his winnings. "Luck comes to those who do not care for it, and flies from those who seek it."

He thrust the money carelessly into his pocket and rose from his seat.

The breaking up of this game seemed to give the signal to the other players, who quickly afterward stopped playing. Within half an hour

afterward, the saloon was deserted. Paul and Juan had been among the first to leave it.

A significant look from Estelle drew Harry from the room. She led the way along the hall and down to the lower floor. Reaching this, she opened the door of a small reception room, and signed to him to enter.

"We can talk undisturbed here," she said, seating herself beside the richly-covered center-table, and motioning Harry to a chair.

"I have several things to say to you, Estelle," he began, looking at her meaningly. "First of all, I have done what you forbade me. I have had an interview with Juan Vernel, and charged him with taking part in this burglary."

Estelle's face grew flaming red at these words. Her eyes gleamed with anger.

"Fool!" she cried passionately, "is that all the trust I can put in you? You did that, and came here afterward? Do you know what you have done?"

"I only know this," he replied, "that you are here as the associate of gamblers and burglars. You cannot have known, at least, this last trait of their character. I call on you to separate from such men. And if you love me, Estelle, give up this disgraceful business."

As she looked at him the angry light faded from her eyes, and a new expression, as of a hunted deer, came into them.

"I cannot!" she cried helplessly. "I am utterly in their power. You think I do this from choice. I do it from necessity. I may seem to be free, but I am a mere puppet. As they pull the strings I must move."

"But this is horrible," he exclaimed. "Confide in me, Estelle. Tell me the mystery that makes you a slave to these villains. You are innocent of crime, I am sure of that. Trust me to defend you against them."

"How do you know I am innocent of crime?" she demanded. "For all you know to the contrary I may be steeped to the very lips in crime. You know nothing of me. Because a woman is beautiful, and has some shreds of a heart, that does not make her a stainless angel. You know nothing of me. It is better you should not. Our lives lie apart. I wish to Heaven I had never seen you!" She struck her small right hand in desperate energy on the table.

"Why should you offer such a wish? What can there be in your life that is forbidden me to know?"

"Because I love you," she desperately replied. "Because I would save you from misery. I intend to endure this life no longer, Harry Foster. I have made up my mind to fly. I would rather die a thousand deaths than endure further the sufferings during the past month."

"To fly?" he answered blankly.

"Yes. At once. Without delay. I cannot bear the danger, the disgrace, the horror of my present life. I will not bear the sneering mastery of those fiends."

"Leave me to deal with them."

"No, no! You are no match for them. And my fate is bound up in theirs. You forget that the measures you design against them may destroy me."

"Then let me fly with you. I will desert everything, fortune, friends, and all, for your dear sake."

A look of tender softness came into the woman's face. She made one step toward him. Then she recoiled with a look of horror.

"No, no! I must go alone. I will drag no one into the gulf that is open for me."

"But why should you fly? This business is not criminal. You are not their associate in burglary. The police are already on the track of the woman who lost her finger. She who lured the key from that weak fool, Davis."

She suddenly grew as rigid as if she had frozen into stone. Her eyes were fixed on him with a look of utter horror and dismay.

"On her track!" she muttered. "On her track!"

"Yes. Why should that affect you so? Can it be possible that the note of invitation was indeed yours? Can it be that you had some share in this ugly business?"

She broke from her rigid attitude. A disdainful smile crossed her face.

"That ends it all," she cried. "You too suspect me!"

His eyes were fixed again on her gloved hands.

"No," he exclaimed. "I have always declared to myself that such a thought is impossible. Yet you have been denounced to me. I have been advised to ask you a certain question. You must answer it, Estelle, not for my satisfaction, but to clear yourself from this calumny."

Why, since your return, have your hands been always gloved?"

If she had been struck in the forehead with a bullet she could not have shown more consternation. Her face grew deathly pale. She tottered as if she would have fallen, and only supported herself by grasping a chair.

This look was succeeded by one of anger and indignation.

"Do you ask me such a question?"

"Yes."

"And demand an answer?"

"I do."

"It is well. But if you persist in it my love goes with this stripped-off glove. No love for me without utter trust."

As she spoke she hastily drew the glove from her right hand, and held it out haughtily to him to examine.

"Look at it. Are there any missing fingers there? Are they not all of flesh and blood?"

He caught her hand, while a shudder shook his strong frame.

"They are the perfect counterpart of the lost finger!" he exclaimed. "The left hand now, Estelle."

"Do you know the fate of the curious woman who looked into Bluebeard's closet?"

"I will see it!" he cried, seizing her hand, and pressing the fingers firmly within his own.

He let it fall with a groan of horror. One of the fingers had remained hard and unyielding under his rude pressure.

"Fool! You have dared your fate. See then, if you will!"

She tore the glove from her hand with an impetuous jerk. To his utter horror, it was a maimed hand! The third finger was gone! What had appeared the finger, remained in the glove.

"You sought for knowledge," she exclaimed, bitterly. "You have found it. I would have saved you. You have destroyed yourself. Look at that imperfect hand. Look your fill at it. You have driven me into a corner, from which there is no escape. I am bound by an oath which I dare not break. Yes, I took part in that burglary. It was my hand that was caught in the safe-door. It was my finger that was severed by the cold and cruel iron. You have forced me to this acknowledgment. The consequences be upon your own head."

She towered like a Pythoness above the shrinking and horror-stricken man. Her right hand caught up a bell from the table, and rung it violently. Anger and fury seemed to pulse from every fiber of her being.

Meanwhile Harry was utterly overwhelmed. He crouched back with his eyes fixed on the wounded hand, as if some magic had riveted them there. His condition was pitiable in that moment of utter horror and mental revulsion.

This terrible scene lasted but a minute. Then the door of the room was flung open, and Paul Clifford and Juan Vernel entered, as if in response to the bell. They looked around. A glance at the situation sufficed to tell them what had happened. Fierce oaths broke from their lips, as they sprung forward, Juan drawing a pistol, on the miserable shrinking man in the corner.

"He would have it," cried Juan. "He shall have his wish."

"Beware the pistol," warned Paul. "There are safer and silenter means."

CHAPTER X.

THE TERRIBLE REPAST.

A DAY had passed slowly away, a day that had been only night to Harry Foster. Impassable walls encircled him, an iron door closed the aperture to the dungeon in which he lay, only the faint light of a lamp stood between him and total darkness.

The unfortunate prisoner strode around his stony-walled cell with the tread of a caged lion. His senses were but now returning, after hours of swoon. His brain was still in a whirl, into which memory but slowly made its way. Nearly twenty-four hours of his life had been to him an utter blank.

There slowly came into his brain recollection of the dreadful mystery he had learned. It was the woman he loved who had been the associate of the burglars, and whose finger had been torn off in that terrible trap! His love, for the time, died out in loathing of the crime in which she had participated. At that moment he hated and detested her.

But, how came he here? He seemed to still see her face, fierce with rage and passion. The sound of that fatal bell yet rung in his ears. He could perceive the ruthless gamblers, rushing

into the room in response. He had a faint recollection of a violent but momentary struggle, of a fierce blow with some weapon on his head, and of a terrible shock that seemed to rend his whole frame asunder. Then all became a blank. He knew no more until he roused to find himself the tenant of this dread vault.

Back and forth through the room he strode, his indignation rising as memory returned.

"The cold-blooded villains!" he exclaimed, "am I destined to be their victim? Fool that I was to venture here, and to rouse that terrible woman by forcing from her the secret of her crime! I was an idiot to attempt this enterprise alone. Now no one knows where to find me. What will be thought when I fail to appear at the bank? I will be charged with flight and robbery. It will be claimed that the former burglary was mine, and that now I have fled with the contents of the safe. Fool, idiot, brainless dolt, that I have been!"

His words were echoed by a sneering laugh from the direction of the cell door. He turned quickly, just in time to see it close. A platter of food had been thrust inside.

"You were not overly wise, indeed, Harry Foster," came in the mocking voice of Juan Vernel. "Wise men do not thrust their heads in the lion's mouth. For your comfort I will tell you that you are already charged with robbery of the bank. The lock of that safe is so sound that they will not easily get it open without the key, which happens to rest in your pocket. Search is being made for you. We can only thank you that you have kindly concealed your visits here. I fancy they will search in vain."

A laugh of cruel mockery succeeded these satirical words. Harry sprang furiously to the door.

"You do well to hide yourself, coward! If you are a man I challenge you to have it out hand to hand."

"I fancy not, my respected bruiser. You have the most muscle, but I have the advantage in brain. I think I will keep my advantage."

"Villain! What is to be the end of this? I shall call you to a fearful account!"

"When you get out," came the sneering reply. "And that will not be soon. You know too much, Harry Foster. You will never leave that prison alive."

The voice, which had come through the iron door with a faint and muffled sound, ceased. A footstep was faintly heard. Then all was silence.

Some other furious words came from the prisoner's lips, but they were wasted on the empty air. He was utterly alone in the gloom and silence of that dungeon.

He broke again into a furious walk, eliest a run, round the grim walls of his cell. His nervous excitement was so great that it would have killed him now to sit still. His furious passion could only be worked off by violent exercise.

For more than half an hour he kept up this excited stride, before his brain began to grow calm and his nerves quiet. He then perceived the platter of food, still sitting where it had been placed on the floor. His first impulse was to send it across the room, by a violent kick. But he had grown somewhat more capable of sober thought.

"My life may rest on that food," he said to himself. "These men would have the fiendishness to starve me. I must sustain my strength as long as possible."

He placed the platter on the rough table that occupied the center of his cell. But he could not eat now. He thrust it from him in disgust, fell upon the solitary chair which his cell contained, and buried his head within his arms. He was lost in the utter misery of the terrible situation into which he had fallen.

For a full hour he continued thus. The lamp-light sent a feeble gleam throughout the cell. Its oil was growing low. In an hour or two more it might be out, and the prisoner be plunged into utter darkness. Was this one of the terrors provided by the ruthless jailers for their helpless captive?

For an hour all had been silence in the cell. The prisoner had not moved from his attitude of depression. Then there came a faint sound, as of the patter of light feet. It was a peculiar sound, too feeble at first to penetrate to the muffled senses of the captive. Yet in time he seemed to recognize that there was something odd and unusual about him. He raised his head slowly from his arms, and gazed around the cell.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright in his chair. At this movement there came a hasty scurrying of the light feet. The mystery was out. At least

a dozen rats had penetrated to the cell from underground passages in the damp floor.

Their diamond-like eyes sparkled in the lamplight. The most of them had retired to their holes at his movement, but two or three sturdy fellows stood their ground, looking at him with glittering eyes.

A shudder ran through the strong man's frame. Here was a new and horrible danger. The lamp, once out, would he not have to fight in the darkness for his life with these voracious creatures?

Yet this feeling was but transient. It was followed by a sentiment of reckless desperation. A laugh of hollow mockery came from his dry lips.

"So, little fellows," he said, as if he was addressing human beings, "you and I have got this palatial hall to ourselves. You have rather the better of me, for you know the way out, but we might as well be good companions while we are together. Art hungry, little folks? Well, I have more here than I want. I will share my platter with you."

He cut up a piece of the meat on the dish into small fragments, which he flung toward the rats.

"There, eat and be merry, little ones."

The scary creatures scampered to their holes at this movement. Yet after a minute or two their eyes again peered outward. Harry kept perfectly still, and his miniature visitors soon again ventured from their lurking-places.

They were not long in discovering the particles of meat on the floor, and attacked them voraciously. Harry again shuddered when he saw their sharp white teeth, and heard the significant crunching sound.

He shut his eyes. For the time he could not bear the spectacle. When he opened them again it was to start hastily to his feet with surprise and horror.

The rats, which he had left busy at their repast, now presented a different appearance. Some of them were staggering feebly toward their holes. Two of them lay prostrate on the floor. As he looked a third fell over, with a faint squeak of pain.

There was no mistaking the meaning of this. They had been poisoned! He had been served with poisoned food, and only this fortunate accident had saved him from the fate that had befallen the rats!

He shook as if in an ague as he stood with his distended eyes fixed on the dead animals. This was death in a shape of which he had not dreamed. A deadly and rapid poison had been mingled with his food. He fell again heavily into his chair, with a groan of dismay.

"Great God!" he cried in agony, "am I to die such a death as this! To perish from poison or starvation! To die the death of a poisoned rat! There must be—there shall be some means of escape from this dreadful fate!"

He sprang to his feet and hurried wildly around the cell, examining every crack and crevice in the wall, in the hope that some avenue of flight might present itself. He tried the iron door, but it was immovable. He even caught the knife from his plate and dug furiously into one of the rat-holes in the earthen floor, in the wild hope that it might lead to some neighboring apartment.

The earth, at first hard, soon became soft and yielding, and he was not long in making an aperture through which he could thrust his hand under the wall. As he did so his groping fingers encountered something soft and furry. He grasped it and drew it out. Then, with a groan of horror, he dropped it as he would have dropped some terrible object. It was one of the poisoned rats that had died in its hole.

The half-insane prisoner let fall the knife and staggered back, with bleared eyes and disheveled hair, his gaze fixed on that fearful object as if he had encountered a basilisk. The thought ran through his mind that, but for a happy chance, he might at that moment have been in the condition of the dead rat.

At that instant, to add to his horror and despair, the flame of the lamp fluttered, shot up brightly for a moment, and then sunk down and vanished. The utter darkness which he had feared was upon him. Trembling from head to foot he groped for his chair and fell heavily upon it. For the time being he was utterly unmanned.

An hour more passed. He had no longer dread of attack by the hungry rats. There was enough poison in that fatal dish to kill a legion of them. Yet the horrors of his situation were enough without this added dread.

Suddenly he lifted his head and assumed a listening attitude. He had heard a faint sound which seemed to come from a long distance. It

was followed by a fumbling movement about the iron door. Was he about to have a visitor? He waited, with clinched hands, half resolved to spring on and throttle any one who might enter his cell.

The lock shot back almost noiselessly. The door opened a crevice. The light of a lamp penetrated the dismal cell. The prisoner, who had drawn by the wall near the door, waited in impatient fury, ready to spring on his incautious visitor.

But he suddenly started back and threw up his hands, while a wild cry came from his lips.

"Estelle! You here? You, faithless, vile, treacherous! Do you dare visit me in this foul dungeon to which you have consigned me?"

It was indeed Estelle Laurent, who stood in the half-open door, lifting her lamp and taking a slow and gradual survey of the cell. Her eyes fell on him with an enigmatical expression.

"You forced me to it," she said, as she closed the door behind her. "I mean you no harm. No injury shall come to you. But you shall not betray and ruin me and mine. You have dared the contest, Harry Foster. Here you shall remain till I am far away. But, good Heaven, I did not mean that you should be here in utter darkness!"

"You trust too much to my folly or forbearance, Countess," he answered with a sneer. "You forget that the door is open, and that I am stronger than my jailer."

"You cannot escape. The house is guarded at all points. Your enemies are not of the kind that leave open avenues to their prisoners."

"Do you mean me no harm? My life is safe here?"

"Yes. You will be released when we are far away, and out of all danger."

"My life safe? Look at this!—and this! Is this the kind of safety you mean?"

He rushed wildly forward and thrust toward her the lifeless rats. Her eyes opened with amazement.

"What do you mean?" she faltered. "I do not understand."

"Then ask your confederate, Juan Vernel. There is the food he provided for me. I shared it with the rats. You see the consequences. Suppose I had partaken of that food?"

As the terrible truth came to her senses she sunk nearly to the floor, in a fearful revulsion of feeling, her eyes fixed on the dead animals as she had been an hour before.

Then she sprang up again with face and eyes blazing.

"This is the last of it all!" she furiously cried.

"They deceived me, they lied to me, they would have destroyed me! From this moment I disown all allegiance to, and throw off all fear of those vile wretches and murderers! You! you, my love, my all! You, whom I had torn my very heart out to discard at their command!—Well for them that their murderous scheme failed, or they would have found what a woman like me could do! You, my own! I will defend you, or die with you."

In her wild passion she rushed across the floor and threw her arms impulsively around him, as if to save him from the strokes of a ruthless foe.

He broke from her embrace with a feeling of utter loathing. Her asseverations he did not half believe. In his heart he charged her with seeking his death.

She fell back, repelled by his thrusting hands. A thousand emotions appeared on her speaking face. That he to whom she had given herself so utterly should treat her thus. Her heart was ready to break with despair. Then a new thought came suddenly to her.

"Let us fly!" she cried. "There is not a minute to lose! You cannot leave the house alone, but I can conduct you out of it. I know ways of escape not known to those wretches. Quick! Follow me! Any minute may bring them here."

He had grown cold and hard. He moved not at her violent prompting, but stood surveying her with stern eyes.

"And what is to be the price of my safety? Am I to yield to that love which I now loathe?"

"No! no! I make no conditions! I have told you already that we can never wed; that there is that in my life that must forever separate us. You do not dream of the terrible secret which has made me what I am. But we are wasting words. Fly! fly! before it is too late!"

At that instant the door closed with a resounding clang. A laugh of bitter mockery came from behind it.

"It is too late now," cried the cold voice of Juan Vernel. "You would betray us, woman. You have sealed your doom. We leave you to share the room and the food of your friend."

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT DETECTIVE SHARP THOUGHT AND DID.

WHILE these events were taking place within the mysterious precincts of Red Hall, others of interest were occurring in the city outside. The new day dawned upon the great city, and life again began its flow. Business was resumed after the night of rest, and the torrent was soon rushing on in its strong daily tide.

Within the banking house of Ditson & Co. the clerks had long since gathered, and the hour for opening the doors to the public was at hand. Mr. Ditson had just made his appearance. He did so to encounter curious glances and significant looks. He saw that something had happened, and nervously demanded the reason of this strange behavior.

"The safe is still closed, sir. Mr. Foster is absent, with the key. He has sent no word to explain his absence."

The banker stared at the speaker in blank amazement. Then he rushed from the room and to the nearest telegraph station, where he sent a hasty message to Foster's address. He followed this by a messenger, who was directed to make all haste, and bring back the key if Mr. Foster should prove to be sick.

No reply came to the telegram. The messenger returned within an hour with the startling information that Mr. Foster was not at home. He had left the house at an early hour of the evening before, and had not yet returned.

At this information significant glances shot from eye to eye around the room.

"Great Heavens! can it be possible that Sharp was right?" cried Mr. Ditson, in a terror. "Go for him, instantly, some one. Here, Clark, you make all haste to the detective's office, and bring Mr. Sharp here without delay. You, Thompson, run for a locksmith. Business cannot go on till we get that safe opened."

An hour brought both the parties sent for, the locksmith, with his tools, and Detective Sharp.

The latter looked askance at the operations of the smith.

"I fancy he will not get that iron box open easily," he remarked. "What is wrong, Mr. Ditson? Have you lost the key?"

"Something startling has happened. Come into my office."

Sharp followed him without a show of emotion on his stolid face. It was as if he had expected such a summons.

The detective quietly helped himself to a chair, and waited calmly for Mr. Ditson's communication.

"I remember," began Mr. Ditson, "that you had suspicions of Mr. Foster's integrity at the time of the burglary."

"Very true," answered Mr. Sharp quietly. "But I have no such suspicions now. I think he is an honest man."

"You do?" exclaimed the banker. "You have changed your opinion?"

"In part. I fear that Mr. Foster has been made the tool of some designing people. I fancy that, without his knowledge, he has been made use of by these burglars."

"Ah! Then you have kept him under your eyes? You know something of his movements? You may be able to trace him?"

"Why?" asked the detective simply. "Something has happened then?"

"Mr. Foster, who has charge of our safe key, has not appeared this morning. I have sent to his house. He is not there, and has not been since last night. I don't know what to think of it, Mr. Sharp. Was he really the burglar before, and has he absconded now with the contents of the safe?"

The detective fell into a moment's deep thought.

"No," he replied. "You will find your cash all right. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"The case stands this way, Mr. Ditson: Foster had nothing to do with the burglary. If he had the safe would have been opened with the key, and emptied of its contents. The finding of the woman's finger clears him. But I think he has been made the dupe of the true burglars. Do you remember his story that he left the bank early that afternoon to escort a lady friend to the cars, on her way to Boston?"

"Yes."

"That lady did not reach Boston by that train. She returned to New York in the evening. She left again in an early morning train, looking pale and feeble, and in company with a gentleman. She had reason to look pale. During the interval her finger had been chopped off by your safe."

"Ah!" cried Mr. Ditson, drawing his breath with a quick gasp.

"Nor is that all. It was the same woman that made a fool of Will Davis. She inveigled him into her den, gave him a sleeping potion, and borrowed from him his key."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the surprised banker. "Are you sure of all this?"

"As sure as I can be of anything I don't know. It is my theory of the case. As for Foster's present disappearance he may have been served the same sauce as Will Davis. Perhaps they have borrowed the safe key this time, and cleared out its contents."

"I hope to Heaven not!" exclaimed Mr. Ditson. "That would be utter ruin."

"I do not think such will prove the case," continued the detective. "I have been using my eyes, and see no signs of a forcible entrance. I have another theory of his disappearance."

"What is that?"

"The wise young man has undertaken to play amateur detective. He has a fancy to screen this young woman, you see. Well, he has followed the burglars a little too closely for their comfort. They have set a trap for him, and he has fallen into it. I should not wonder if Harry Foster was in imminent danger of his life at this moment. The men who could engineer a job like that are not likely to be scrupulous."

"Great Heaven! And you tell me that as coolly as if you were talking about chicken-feed! Something must be done at once! You must rescue him, Mr. Sharp."

"Something is being done," answered the detective, quietly. "I have not been sleeping over your business, Mr. Ditson. As for this woman and her confederates, they have so far eluded me. They have very cunningly covered their tracks. But Mr. Foster has been constantly under the eyes of a sharp spy ever since the date of the burglary. I wished to find where he goes and who he associates with."

"And what have you discovered?"

"Nothing. I fancy he has suspected my spy, and has contrived to throw dust in his eyes. Yesterday I changed my man and put him under another pair of eyes. I have had, as yet, no report. But I am not without hopes that we may have the whip hand of the burglars."

After continuing the conversation for some time longer, Mr. Sharp took his departure, desiring that he should be notified of the condition of the safe as soon as it was opened.

About one o'clock word came to his office in the shape of a brief note:

"Safe opened. Contents all right. Your theory must be correct. Do all you can to rescue poor Foster."

Mr. Sharp rubbed his hand reflectively over his forehead.

"Queer I haven't heard from Smith," he soliloquized. "He has found a nest-egg somewhere. I should not wonder if we were nearing the end of this deep game."

He was interrupted by the entrance of a man, at sight of whom his eyes opened in welcome. It was a middle-aged man, dressed in a well-worn suit of rough gray, and looking much like an ordinary laborer.

"Just the man I was thinking of. Matters are coming to a focus, Smith. I hope you have not been wasting your time."

The spy seated himself, and answered in a very methodical and matter-of-fact tone.

"I have here a short mem. of my work, which I shall trouble you to look over." He handed an open memorandum-book to the detective. "House number one on the list Mr. F. entered yesterday afternoon, as there stated. Hour of six. Remained a half-hour. Returned home. Out again at eight. Took carriage. I tried to follow, but lost trace of him through fast driving."

"You are growing weak-minded, Smith," said the detective, looking at him sharply.

"It was a trick. The man suspects he is shadowed. He played an old game on me."

"Go on. That is not all."

"No. House number one has been shadowed since ten last night. Hanly took it on. He knows F.'s associates. This morning a gentleman entered that house whom he recognized. It was the man who, on a former occasion, picked up F. in a carriage on Broadway, and left Hanly in the lurch. A chap of doubtful character."

"I know. Proceed."

"He left the house again two hours ago. Hanly and I followed. Had to be wide-awake, for the man is sharp as a steel-trap. Seemed to know Hanly. I passed the tip and Hanly let

himself get flung. But Smith spotted the fox. Ran him to cover in house number two."

Sharp looked at the memorandum. The locality of the house seemed to strike him. He muttered some words in a low tone.

"Do you know the place? Have you learned anything?" he inquired.

"Shadowy," answered Smith, shaking his head. "Neighbors non-committal. Know nothing of the occupants. Grocer reports good customers. Been there three months only. Policeman on beat says very quiet and respectable, but doubtful. Party of fashionable young men, fast-looking, go in every night. Gambling den, he thinks. Servants been seen. Once saw a woman leave the house. Muffled up, but tall, stately, richly dressed. Very tony, he says."

Mr. Sharp looked up suddenly. He was on the verge of a discovery, or fancied so.

"You have done well, Smith." He returned the memorandum-book. "Is anybody on the house?"

"Hanly."

"Then return immediately. I have a notion there is the very Old Nick to pay just now, in that mansion. Hunt up that policeman. I want to question him. We must be sure of our ground before we move. I will be after you inside of an hour. Hurry now. In critical times minutes are golden."

"Very serious, is it?"

"Murder, maybe; burglary at the least. Stir your steps."

Smith's face grew very important as he bustled out. He had not dreamed of such a game as this. The case swelled immensely in his eyes.

Mr. Sharp made some hasty notes and memoranda, then shoved his papers aside, pushed back his chair and took his hat.

"Three or four good men will be necessary," he said to himself. "There may be ugly work before us. I may be mistaken, but something in my bones tells me that there is a big thing on the cards, and big things are my bread and butter."

He left the room.

CHAPTER XII.

A WOMAN'S CONFESSION.

MEANWHILE matters had come to a focus in the Red Hall. Within the dungeon the two captives remained, expecting nothing but death. There was food on the table, but it was poisoned. They must either eat that and choose a speedy death, or endure the slower agony of starvation. There stood that iron door between them and liberty, and both seemed to recognize that it would not open again.

The woman threw herself on the chair, with a look of despair.

"I know them too well," she declared. "They will fly and leave us here to perish. This place is out of hearing. We will die before it is discovered."

"Who prepared this dungeon?" demanded Foster, fixing his eyes sternly on her shrinking form. "For what purpose was it prepared?"

"It is the work of Vernel and Clifford," she replied. "I know not what they intended. I am not the confidante of their dark secrets. I, like you, have been their tool and their victim."

"A willing one, it appears," he satirically answered.

"As you will. My life has not been under my own control. My life! Do not think I value that, Harry Foster. For all that my existence is worth, I might as well swallow some of that poisoned food, and be done with the miserable farce."

"Then why do you not do so?" he asked, in a bitterly cold tone.

"It is for you, I live, not for myself!" she passionately answered. "It was I who brought you into this terrible business. It was I who lured you to ruin. Can you ask why I am doomed by remorse, and why I cling to this miserable life, with the hope that it may aid you to escape this peril?"

Her voice was so full of heartfelt passion, that some of the dormant love rose again in his soul, as his eyes surveyed the shrinking form before him. But he fiercely drove back this feeling, and coldly rejoined:

"Your words do not tally with your acts, Estelle Laurent. If ruin and death come to me through this business, I will have nobody but you to thank for it."

"Good Heaven!" she cried, with yet stronger emotion. "This to me! And after all I have suffered for him! Look at that hand!" She held up the maimed left hand, with its fatal lack of a finger.

"Do you suppose that was done from choice? It was to save you, that I had my flesh torn from my body, and endured weeks of suffering. And this is my reward."

"To save me? How? Explain yourself! In what way was I concerned in this dreadful accident?"

He caught the mutilated hand, and gazed at it with eyes in which some of his old feeling of tenderness was returning.

"Listen," she replied. "I will tell you all. If we are to die together it shall not be with any mysteries between us. Believe me, Harry Foster, I have not pursued a life of crime from choice. I dare not disobey the orders of these men. Yet the most I have done has been to use my beauty as a lure to draw

rich fools to my gaming-tables. In this affair, however, they forced me to go further. They laid the plan by which I made a fool of that weak-headed Davis, and obtained the key to the banking-house from him. When I set out that afternoon for Boston I but carried out their instructions. I was to return by the earliest way-train. The object was to prevent you from entertaining any suspicions, and to gain a witness in my favor, if necessary. I did not know then, that it was the bank with which you were concerned that was to be robbed. Had I known I would have had both hands cut off before aiding them in their scheme."

Foster pressed the hand he held. He had sunk to the floor at her feet, and sat looking up into her strongly-moved face with eyes full of the old love.

"What followed?" she resumed. "They set out to perform their lawless work. I discovered, by mere chance, after their departure, that you were a member of the firm that was to be robbed. That I was deeply indignant at their deception I need not repeat. I determined to prevent their work at any risk. I left the house and hastened to the point of their operations. They had neglected to lock the door, and I opened it and entered. You may imagine the consternation which my appearance excited. They had already forced the safe door partly open with their powerful instruments, and had obtained part of the money. I was burning with indignation, and commanded them to desist, with threats of exposure. I pushed Paul Clifford indignantly away, and laid my hand on the forced-out edge of the safe door. At that instant, I know not how, the iron instrument which had forced the door open became loosened and fell out, and the door sprung to with a terrible snap. Unhappily one of my fingers had been thrust into the open crack. You may imagine the horror of that moment. It was clipped off as by a pair of shears. I fell back in a faint, leaving the lacerated flesh. Ah!" she cried, with a shudder, "I would sooner die ten deaths than go through that dreadful minute again!"

Her thrilling tale had filled the listener's soul with deep emotions. The passion of the voice, the vision of that loved face so near his own, the thought of all she had endured for his sake, was more than his resolution could withstand. He sprang up and clasped her in his arms.

"Dear, dear Estelle!" he exclaimed. "And you have suffered all this for me? Forgive me my coldness, my suspicions, my brutal harshness. I see now how I have wronged you. Can you forgive me?"

She answered by a look in which all the love of a strong soul was concentrated. With a gush of fervor he pressed his lips to hers in ardent kisses. Just then he would have lost the world to win that woman!

Several minutes passed, during which she told, in broken accents, the brief remainder of her story, how the burglars had left the place in panic error, taking her with them, how her wound had been dressed and she had been taken to Boston by one of the gang. Here she had been put under the care of a surgeon employed by persons of the law-breaking fraternity, and pledged to secrecy. She had staid there till the wound healed, and till she was provided with an artificial finger.

A half-hour passed. They sat there hand in hand, happy in the consciousness of their mutual love, and heedless of death while that feeling remained supreme.

"You have told me so much, you must tell me all, Estelle," he declared. "We have no right to have any secrets from each other. What is the terrible hold which these men have upon you? I demand to know. It may be less vital than you deem."

"It is dreadful," she shudderingly replied. "I dare not tell it to you. From the moment I do our love ends, and you will spurn me as an accursed being."

"Never, Estelle. You could never have done anything that could make me spurn you. I demand the mystery of your life."

She was still for a minute, wrapped in deep thought. Then she broke from him with a start, tore her hand from his grasp, and cried out in a tone of horror:

"You must and will have my story, it is this! I am a murderer! A vile accursed thing! This mutilated hand has robbed a human being of life! Was this sent on me as punishment?" She held up the maimed hand. "I killed him, Harry Foster! I hardly regret my crime, for he richly deserved it. Yet I am a fugitive from the law. These villains alone know of my crime. They could hang me with a word. Do you wonder that I shrink from that disgraceful death, or that I obey their commands in order to save myself from the gallows?"

He stood looking at her with an emotion equal to her own. He had forced a confession from her lips, and it was crushing him.

"A murderess!" he muttered in horror-stricken tones.

"A murderess! Turn your eyes from me. Look not upon my accursed form again. I have placed myself beyond the pale of human love and pity. Yet God knows I but removed an utter villain from the world. He was my lover, Harry Foster. He was to have been my husband; yet he insulted me so grossly, so unbearably, that passion for the moment utterly controlled me. I had a knife in my hand at that fatal minute. In ungovernable fury I thrust it in his breast. He fell bleeding before me. I fled, aided by the two witnesses to my crime. Great God! shall I ever get the vision of that bleeding body from before my eyes?"

She covered her face with her hands, and sunk to the damp floor in uncontrollable emotion. Harry looked down on her, his heart torn by mingled feelings. Yet there was a gleam of hope in his eyes.

"How do you know the law is seeking you?" he cried. "Are you sure the man was really killed? When and where did this happen?"

She looked up with wild eyes. "He was bleeding to death when I left. I have learned all the rest from Paul Clifford and his confederate. I could not endure to read a word about my fearful crime. It was in New Orleans, six years ago."

"And the man's name was Redner Wilkinson?"

"Yes, yes! What can you know about it?"

"I know that you have been brutally and cruelly deceived. I was in New Orleans at the time. You are no murderess, Estelle. Deeply as you wounded him, the man recovered. Your supposed victim lived to commit more crimes. He was killed in Texas, not a year ago, in a tavern brawl. They have lied to you, to control and ruin you."

"Great God, can this be so?"

She had risen to her feet, and was standing staring at him with disheveled hair and bloodshot eyes, her arm involuntarily advanced. Just then she looked supremely beautiful.

"I have told you the truth, Estelle," he cried. "You are free from this crime. There is nothing to separate us, and I owe you the devotion of a life for this poor finger, lost in my behalf."

He gathered her again to his heart in a burst of uncontrollable love. Her proud head slowly sunk on his shoulder, while a flood of tears relieved the pent-up passion of her soul. They were tears not of pain, but of relief and happiness.

For some minutes they stood thus, all in all to each other. The pale beams of the lamp lit up the dismal room, into whose dread depths the light of love had come. Then Harry broke from his spell of happy inaction, his eyes burning, his veins running with fevered pulses.

"Shall we die now, with a life of happiness before us?" he cried. "No, no! There is yet a chance of escape! There is one possible avenue by which we may break out from this dreadful dungeon!"

He sprang across the floor to the spot where he had before been digging, caught up the fallen knife and began again to energetically fling up the wet earth. Rapidly, before his wild fervor, the heap of excavated earth accumulated. Rapidly the avenue which might become their path to freedom widened and deepened.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ESCAPE AND A CHECK.

The knife which Harry Foster was using as an excavating tool was long, sharp, and broad-bladed. Possibly it had been given to him to use for another purpose, if he preferred death by a knife-blow to poison or starvation.

Used as a spade, in his strong hands, it rapidly made its way into the soft earth. Numbers of rats had made their excavations at that point, and a dozen holes cut through the wet ground. Between these holes were cakes of sodden clay which he cut loose in lumps and lifted out with his hands.

It was not long before he had made a hole more than a foot deep, and wide enough to stand in. Estelle stood looking at him with interest and surprise.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "How can we escape by digging into the earth?"

"See here," he replied. "We are at the foundation of the house. These rat-holes run under the foundation wall. It is not a foot deep here. I can thrust my hand beneath it already. I am going to dig the earth from under it, and then let the stones fall down into the pit. Some of them are loose now. Wherever this leads I will make a hole in the wall that we can pass through."

Estelle's surprise was changed to hope and excitement as she realized his meaning. Her feeling of despair became one of desire for life.

"This is the cellar floor," she said. "That wall opens into another part of the cellar. If you can excavate it we are safe. Let me do my share. You must be worn out, I am strong."

"No, no. See, I am under the wall already. The rats have done good work. And this is one of your modern walls, with mortar like flour paste. The stones are only laid together. Ha! there comes one now!"

He started back as one of the unsupported stones of the wall dropped down into the cavity he had made. He inserted his knife-blade into the open cracks, and soon had others loosened and ready to fall.

"Stand back, Estelle," he warned.

With nervously strong hands he tugged out the fallen stone, and threw it on the pile of dirt. Then with eager haste he widened and deepened the cavity beneath the wall, dragging back the loose earth with his hands.

"Beware," cried Estelle. "The wall is cracking! It is going to fall!"

He drew quickly back, just in time to escape a heap of stones, mortar and dirt, which came surging down with a noise that must have resounded through the house.

Heedless whether or not he had given the alarm he flung himself wildly upon the fallen heap, and tore out its fragments with hands that soon ran with blood. He seemed frantic in his haste as he tugged at the jagged stones. Others came down as the cavity was increased. They continued to fall in fragments until some larger stones were reached that braced the remaining wall. But a yawning opening had been made, quite wide enough for a human body to pass through.

He continued his labors until the fallen stones had been in great part removed, and the excavation was clear.

"Our work is done, Estelle," he cried gladly. "We can crawl through this cavity. And we must not lose a minute. Our enemies may attack us before we can escape."

Leaping into the cavity, he found no difficulty in creeping through the gaping hole in the wall. Estelle followed, heedless of her rich dress. He caught her arms, and helped her through the narrow passage.

The lamp was left behind in the dungeon, yet it threw sufficient light through the opening to reveal the fact that they stood in an open cellar, which was divided off by stone partition walls, through one of which they had made their way.

The dungeon occupied one end of the cellar. The wall was a newly built one, and had not yet become compacted. They shuddered as they looked on the strong iron door, fastened with powerful bolts.

They listened intently. There were noises in the house overhead. Their eyes met in alarm.

"We must fly at once," cried Estelle, "before our avenue of escape is cut off."

"I will make warm work for the man who stops me," he fiercely answered, looking around him for a weapon.

He found a long-handled, rusty hammer, which lay in a corner of the cellar. Grasping this firmly, he caught Estelle by the hand, and hurried her rapidly toward the stairs.

"Come," he said; "our chance will be better above."

"Stop," she answered, in a low tone, drawing him back. "Wait—listen."

Steps and voices could be clearly heard above. They seemed approaching. She drew him back to a dark corner beside the stairs.

"They have taken the alarm," she whispered. "They are about to descend. Let us conceal ourselves here. If they go forward to examine the dungeon, we can rush up the stairs and escape."

The idea was a good one; he yielded to her impulse. But his teeth closed grimly as he knotted his fingers around the handle of his weapon. He did not feel inclined to fly until he had made his dastardly foes feel the weight of his strong right arm.

The door to the cellar opened. A faint gleam from an upper light came down into the dark and damp apartment. The sounds of familiar voices met their ears.

"That was a very strange sound," came in the voice of Paul Clifford. "Could it have been down here?"

"All seems quiet now," answered Juan. "I had a job to talk down Warner and Jones. They evidently are expecting earthquakes."

"Likely we were mistaken in the direction," rejoined Paul. "However, we had better take a look, and make sure that all is right."

At this moment the door-bell violently rung. They hesitated.

"Who can that be?"

"Some fool that is so eager to lose his money that he has come an hour ahead of time. Let James take care of him. We must thoroughly pluck all that come to-night. At midnight, you know, we bid good-by to this palace of cash, and we must set out with well-filled pockets."

The speaker, Paul Clifford, was descending the stairs as he spoke.

"And the idiots who have chosen to stand in our way?"

"Poison or starvation will do for them. By the time the house is opened and searched they will certainly be past harm."

A coarse laugh came from Juan's lips.

"The Countess has found her true love at last. Let us hope they may enjoy their long love tryst."

"What a dupe and a fool she has been," laughed Paul, who had now reached the cellar floor. "She is a tigress, though, under all her smooth skin. Do you remember her rage when she knifed her former lover? I wonder how she will serve this one? Kill him with kindness, probably."

Harry Foster felt the frame of the woman who leaned upon him quiver with shame and indignation at the coarse allusion. The contact set his own veins on fire, till they seemed to run with liquid flame. Burning with the fury that possessed him at these insults of his foes he forgot all caution, and sprang forward in an overpowering rage.

"They laugh best who laugh last, Paul Clifford," came in grim accents from his compressed lips.

The startled villain hastily turned toward the unexpected voice. But before he could move a step or utter a sound the dangerous weapon that was quivering in the hands of the indignant lover, came down with a crushing blow on his head.

He sunk to the floor as if he had been struck by a rifle-bullet, with a single groan of pain. Like a dead man he lay there, outstretched on the earthen floor.

Swinging his weapon above his head Harry dashed madly for the stairs, on which stood his remaining foe.

"Come on, Estelle," he cried. "I will make a path."

Juan Vernel had sprung back in alarm at the sudden fall of his companion. For a single instant he seemed as if about to fly. Then his thin lips curled, his eyes flashed, his hand sought the pistol which he always carried.

"Beware!" cried Estelle, in an agony of fear, as she too sprang to the stairs. "He is armed! He is about to fire!"

Harry flung his swinging weapon at his foe, with quick and deadly aim. But the sharp-eyed villain saw it coming and stooped to avoid it. It whizzed over his shoulder and struck the wall behind him with a crushing blow.

"It is my turn now," he hissed, drawing and cock-

ing his revolver with a single movement. "And my aim never misses."

A touch on the trigger, a sharp detonation, and a form staggered and fell, pierced by the fatal bullet.

But it was not the form of Harry Foster, the intended victim of the villain. For at that perilous instant, with the unselfish instinct of love, Estelle had sprung before him with a sharp cry of dismay.

It was her breast that the bullet had pierced. It was her form that, pouring blood, fell back in the arms of her lover, and drove him with the dead weight forcibly from the steps to the floor.

A cry of triumph came from the lips of the murderer.

"I must finish my work," he hissed. "Dead men tell no tales."

But at that moment there came unexpected sounds from behind. There were the rush of hasty steps. A voice, full of authority and decision, seemed issuing commands. The ruffian hesitated, with uplifted pistol, as if he chafed at being cheated of his prey. But the instinct of self-protection triumphed. He flung the weapon, with a cry of rage, at the head of Harry Foster, who was just struggling up beneath the dead weight of the lifeless woman. Then he turned, eager for escape, and sprang with a single leap to the head of the stairs.

He went no further. A stalwart form barred his passage. The hall seemed full of strong stern men.

"Hold fast, my friend. We have a trifle of business with you before you can be spared."

It was the cool, firm voice of detective Sharp.

"Take care of this fellow," he said to the man behind him. "There has been some bad work down here, if I am not mistaken. Don't let him escape."

There was but one passage, and that was occupied by a half-dozen stalwart policemen. Yet Juan leaped at them with the fury of a cornered wolf, and sought desperately to force his way through them. He had thrust aside two or three, and leaped at the fourth with head depressed, like a human battering-ram.

But he met an unexpected obstacle. The club of the officer descended with a stunning blow on his head felling him like a dog to the floor.

"Put the darcies on him," ordered the officer, thrusting him with his foot. "He's a dangerous one. And it's likely he has done some damage down here."

While this was taking place Detective Sharp had hurried down the cellar-stairs, his eyes fixed on the three prostrate forms at the bottom.

"Bring a light here, somebody," he cried. "And look out for that fellow. There's been some murderous work, from the looks of things."

The pistol flung by the baffled villain had struck Foster on the forehead, and felled him again to the floor, where he lay, half stunned. Estelle lay motionless across his body, the blood from her wound soaking him with its deadly crimson.

"A light here! Quick!" repeated the detective. "This woman is bleeding dangerously. And there are two men who have got their quietus."

A light was quickly procured, and the situation of affairs revealed. Foster had been knocked insensible by the blow of the revolver, but he recovered his senses as they lifted the wounded woman from his form. He sprang to his feet, with wild eyes and haggard face.

"Oh! she is not dead! Say she is not dead!" he cried, in a tone of agony. "She sprang before me and took the bullet to save my life. If she is dead I will kill myself! Answer me, some one, quick!"

"No, she is not dead," replied the detective.

"Her heart still beats. But she seems to have a terrible wound. It is a question if she can recover. Here, some of you—*you*, Hanly—run for a surgeon, instantly. Carry this woman up-stairs, some of you. Search the house and see if there are any women in it. This bleeding must be stopped at once. Her life will soon run out at this rate."

Two of the strongest officers took the insensible form in their arms, and bore her tenderly up-stairs. Harry, distracted with love and grief, would have followed, but the detective laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"You can do no good there," he said. "You will only do harm in your present mood. Stop here and tell me what this means. Who are these men? What has happened to this fellow lying here?"

"I struck him down with a hammer," answered Harry, hoarsely. "I do not know if I have killed him; nor do I care much."

The detective leaned over the prostrate man.

"No, he is not dead," he said. "But you gave him a settler. Now, quick! tell me what has happened. Where have you been? There is the very deuce to pay in the city about you."

Harry led the way back to the dungeon and laid his hand on the iron door.

"I have been in there," he said. "I would never have come out alive but for that hole which I dug through the wall. It is a terrible experience I have passed through. Shall I tell the story?"

"Yes. Tell it all."

It was partly his purpose to turn the lover's thoughts away from the wounded form that lay bleeding up-stairs. But he soon felt a thrilling interest in the story as its excited incidents were related to him. The terrible episode of the poisoned rats made even his iron nerves quiver with excitement.

Harry was interrupted, near the close of his story, by the descent of one of the officers.

"The surgeon is here," he announced.

"Ah! And what does he say?"

"The wound is dangerous, but not fatal. With good luck she may recover."

"Thank God for that!" cried Harry, fervently. "She sought to give her life for mine!"

"There is one more word to say, Mr. Sharp," continued the officer. "In examining this woman we have discovered that the third finger of her left hand is missing. She is the woman who lost her finger in the safe."

"Hal! I suspected as much. Yet you did not mention this interesting fact, Mr. Foster."

"I have not ended my story yet," answered Harry gloomily. "Nor can I now. I must see the surgeon. I must learn from his own lips if she will recover. If she dies I will follow her to the grave."

He rushed hastily to the stairs, followed more slowly by the detective, on whose face there played a mingled expression of official sternness and manly sympathy.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF ALL.

We must hasten to the culmination of our nearly ended story. A month slowly passed—a month that made many changes in the condition of our characters.

The two arch villains were consigned to prison, where they yet lay awaiting trial for their discovered crime. As for the stolen money it was recovered to the last penny, among their effects. They had apparently made every preparation to fly with their ill-gotten gains. Only the breaking out of their intended victims from their living grave, and the discovery and raiding of the Red Hall by the police, had prevented their plans from being carried to a termination.

That there was deep public interest in the published accounts of this remarkable crime and escape need not be told. Harry Foster, against whom a deep shadow of suspicion had rested, was fully reinstated in public opinion, and became quite the lion of the hour.

As for Will Davis he was released from prison, and the prosecution against him stopped, when the story of how he had lost the key, and where and how he obtained the marked money, was made public.

Mr. Ditson freely forgave him under the firm assurance that he would never go astray again. He had been punished too bitterly not to be cured of any desire to grow rich by speculation.

Estelle, meanwhile, lay long hovering between life and death. The condemnation with which the community was ready to visit her faded away when the strange story of her life became known, and the fact that she had been more sinned against than sinning was made evident.

But what most enlisted public opinion in her favor was the story of the love between her and Harry Foster, the untiring patience of and devotion with which he haunted the house in which she lay between life and death, and the haggard pain and despair that had reduced his strong frame almost to a shadow.

The great public is always interested in the romance of love, and it had chosen to make heroes of these two lovers, forgetting all the shadowy episodes of the life of Estelle Laurent, in their sympathy with its culminating incident.

A month passed by. The invalid had fallen into a deep slumber, after the fierce fever that had burned like fire for many days in her veins. The doctor declared that her waking would tell the story of her fate. Her life hung on a mere thread of chance.

Harry paced a room below the chamber of his betrothed in an agony of pain and impatience. He could hardly endure the suspense, which had hung over him for weeks and now neared its climax. His haggard face told of many long nights of sleeplessness.

He could not bear the house. He sought the streets and walked miles in a vain effort to quiet his throbbing nerves. He returned to the house. The physician was just leaving it. There was a promising look upon his face.

"Your face gives me hope!" cried the eager lover. "Has she awakened? Will she recover? Ah! there is hope in your look!"

"Your devotion certainly deserves a favorable answer," replied the doctor with a smile. "I am glad to be able to give it to you. Miss Laurent is awake. The fever is broken. The wound promises well. With care now I think she is sure to recover."

"Bless you for those words!" cried Harry, seizing his hand, on which he let fall a tear of joy. "May I see her? Can she bear my presence? I am dying to see her!"

"If you can keep quiet, and not excite her."

"I promise you that."

"And stay not more than five minutes?"

"I promise everything," cried Harry, dashing into the house.

He was repaid for his long sorrow and suspense by the look of utter trust and love with which her wan face greeted him, and by the pressure of the thin hand which she feebly extended to him.

He stooped and kissed her pallid lips.

"I promised not to excite you, Estelle," he murmured. "I hope that this will not do you harm."

"No, my love, my own!" she tenderly replied, with eyes that beamed with deep affection. "Kiss me once more, dear. The touch of your lips sends healing through every fiber of my frame."

From this moment, recovery was rapid. In a month more, she was convalescent. In six months, from the period of her receiving her almost fatal wound, Harry Foster led her to the altar, the handsomest woman in New York. It was not with plain gold or diamond that he wedded her, but with that opal ring, the loss of which had been the turning point in her fate.

"You have still a finger to receive this ring, dear Estelle," he whispered, as he kissed his lovely and blushing bride.

And so we may leave them to the life of happiness that is before them, a life free from the shadows that threw such gloom over its earlier part.

If any of our readers care to know what became of Paul Clifford and Juan Vernal, they may be seen any time in their striped convict dress, at Sing Sing, working out with hammer and chisel the penalty of their crimes, and perhaps happy in the consciousness that they have escaped gallows which they so richly deserved.

THE END.

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